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44 Western

MAGAZINE

MARCH

**FEUDISTS MAKE
TOUGH KILLING!**

*SMASHING NOVEL
OF FRONTIER TEXAS*
by **JOHN H. LATHAM**

**HANGNOOSE FEVER
HITS EPITAPH**

by **JOSEPH CHADWICK**

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DICK WON ALL AROUND WHEN...

HERE'S A GRAND.
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I'LL MAKE IT FIVE

O.K. IT'S
IN THE BAG

AFTER GUARDING HIS HORSE ALL NIGHT, DICK O'NEIL, EX-MARINE AND OWNER OF "IVO JIMA", LONG SHOT, OVERHEARS SUSPICIOUS CONVERSATION ON MORNING OF BIG RACE

BETTER ACT FAST,
MR. HILL. I WANT
"IVO" TO BEAT
YOUR HORSE, BUT
I HATE CROOKS

I'LL CALL
THE RACING
ASSOCIATION

CAUGHT HIM
RED-HANDED,
MR. HILL. THE
OLD SPONGE
TRICK

MY OWN
TRAINER!
HOW COULD YOU
DO SUCH A THING?

YOU'RE A REAL
SPORTSMAN.
WON'T YOU JOIN
MY DAUGHTER AND
ME IN OUR BOX?

THANKS...
I'LL BE GLAD
TO AT
POSTTIME

FIRST CHANCE
I'VE HAD TO
SHAVE-AND
NO RAZOR

COME
ON, USE
MINE

WHAT A SWELL
BLADE, EDDIE!
NEVER HAD A
FASTER, SLICKER
SHAVE

THIN
GILLETTE
ARE TOPS
WITH ME.
THEY'RE
PLENTY KEEN

O-O-O-O!
IVO WINS!

I SURE
WISH FLASH
HAD BEEN
AS WELL-
TRAINED

I'M GOING TO HIRE A
NEW TRAINER, MR. O'NEIL.
ANY CHANCE YOU'D CARE
TO TALK BUSINESS
TONIGHT?

SOUNDS
GOOD TO ME,
MR. HILL

I LIKE
HIS LOOKS

TO GET SMOOTH, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES WITH SPEED AND COMFORT, TRY THIN GILLETTE BLADES. THEY'RE KEEN, LONG-LASTING AND FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. THUS THEY PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE IRRITATING EFFECT OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES



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44 Western

MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

NO REPRINTS

Vol. 14

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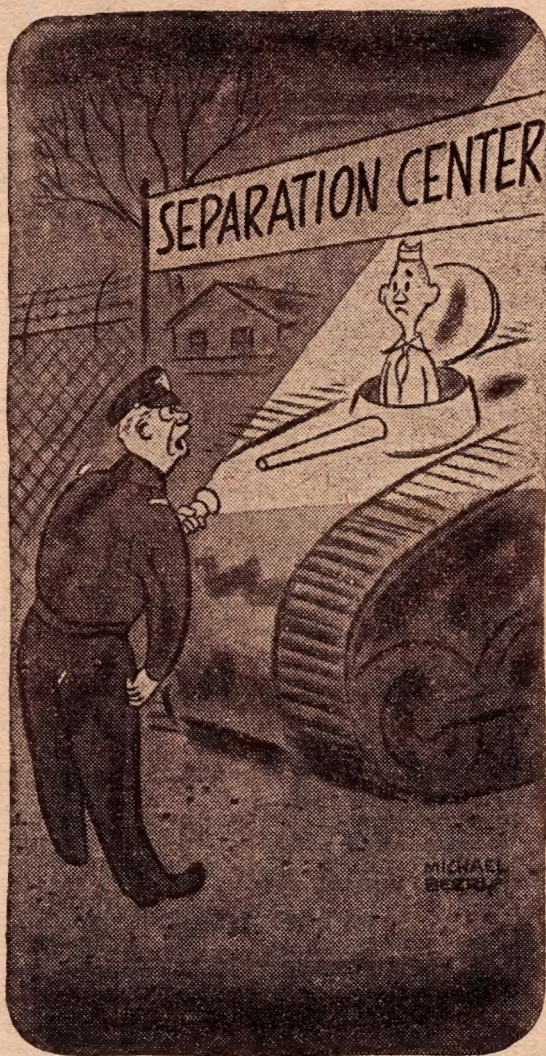
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★ .44 TALK ★

THE old-timer stood bow-legged in the doorway, his greasy Stetson cocked on the back of his head, his horny thumbs jammed into the double cartridge belts that crossed his skinny belly. Egg stain, coffee smear and bacon juice—not to mention the burrs—decorated his weathered chaps. But his sixguns looked sharp, shiney and business-like.

"Go away, old man!" we said, not wishing particularly at the time to listen to a yarn about his pulling a curley wolf inside out, or killing a grizzly bear with a broomstick. But the old-timer pulled a bottle of Forty-Rod from somewhere under his faded jean shirt, raised it to his lips and took one hell of a long pull. He snorted, burped and spat on the floor.

Seeing this Forty-Rod perked us up no end. "Come in! Come in and set a while, old man!" we said jovially. Then, catching the weary look in the old-timer's eyes, we went on: "Tell us your troubles, if any." As an afterthought, we added cautiously, "Put your red-eye on the desk. You might drop the bottle!"

The old jigger eased himself into a chair with great creaking of joints, hoisted up his stiffened legs and then rowelled be-jabbers out of our desk top. He looked at us out of suddenly bleary eyes.

"Strikes!" said he. "What in hell's tarnation is this here strike business all about?"

Never having been scab, strike-buster or any kindred skunk—and no tenderfoot economist, to boot—we gave the ancient jasper our interpretation of a strike. After we had done shooting off our mouth the old-timer considered for a moment.

"Wa'll," he said after a while, "back in '86 't'warent done that way. . . ."

The old boy palavered on and on, and a picture of the American frontier slowly materialized before our eyes.

Across the arid plain, strewn with the sun-whitened skulls of man and beast alike, a caravan of stout-bodied Conestogas slowly made its way—bound for the golden coast of California.

In the wagons, with their high dusty bows and dirty canvas lying drearily on slatted, arching ribs, babies bawled; wom-

en in faded calico mended and darned, gossiped and cooked; tobacco-stained oldsters handled the rains and spun endless tall tales.

Hard young men, their saddle guns and side-arms primed and ready, sat their slowly moving ponies on the flanks of the prairie convoy, their squinting eyes alert for sign of savage red man—or more savage white.

There was no labor-management trouble here. Only life and courage. Life for the moment. Hope for the future—and courage to fight for that life and hope without which there would be no world.

In the early days, when mighty America was stretching itself and growing, the constant danger of the Westward crawling frontier welded, in those covered-wagon trains, the good and the bad, the rich and poor, tinhorn, cowman, squire and squatter, into a society that must cooperate or die.

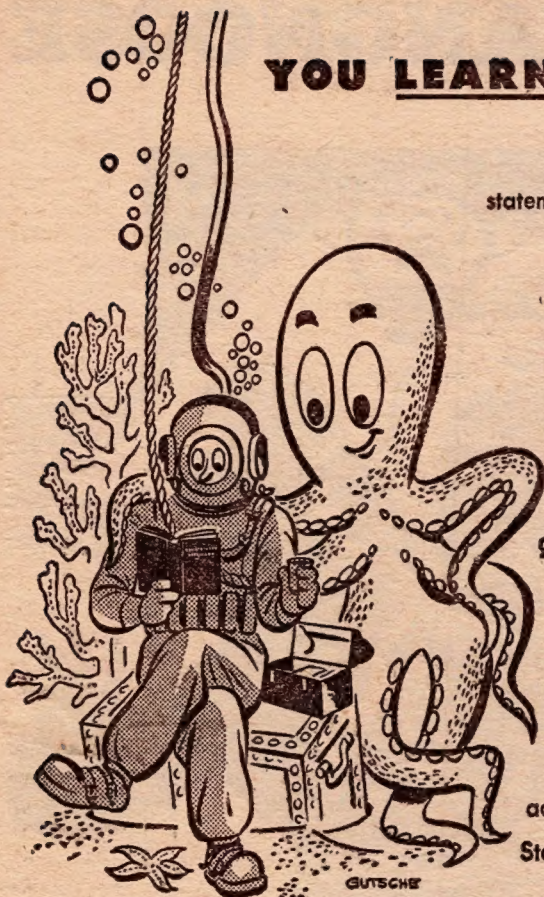
These salty old-timers were outriders of discovery and civilization. The unmarked graves they left along that tough trail to the Pacific coast are monuments to the security which we, their descendants, enjoy today. If security it can be called.

Twice now, forgetting what, in comparison, might be called skirmishes—America has defended with the blood of her youth, that dauntless heritage of the pioneers. And twice, after each great victory, the powers of jealousy and hate have struggled viciously to come into their own.

It has been proved, time and again, that modern America has the fighting blood of its forefathers. But, sometimes, it seems that cooperation—in peace as well as in war—that means life and progress, isn't quite up to the standards they set back in 1848.

—THE EDITOR

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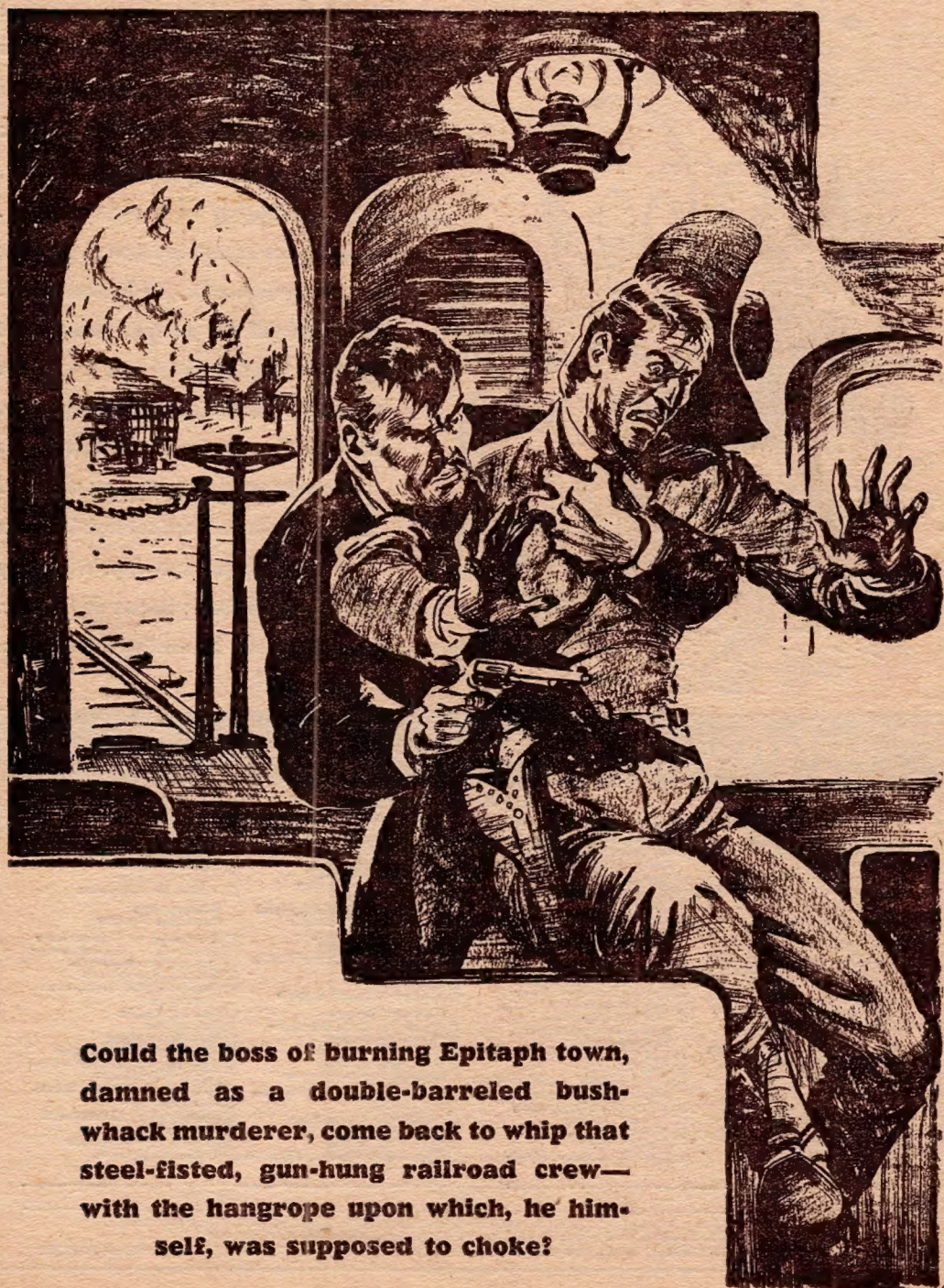
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By Joseph
Chadwick

HANGNOOSE

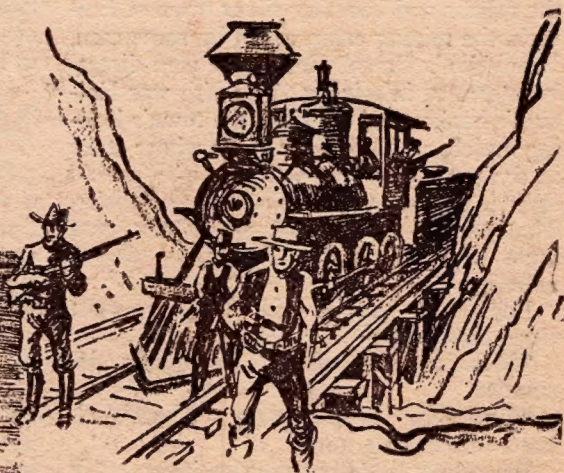


Could the boss of burning Epitaph town, damned as a double-barreled bush-whack murderer, come back to whip that steel-fisted, gun-hung railroad crew—with the hangrope upon which, he himself, was supposed to choke?

FEVER HITS EPITAPH

Action-Jammed Novel of Boomtown Treachery

Brannigan roared, "Jennifer, I once said I'd put a rope around your neck!"



CHAPTER ONE

Brannigan Goes to War

ALL his life, which was forty-some turbulent years, Big Sam Brannigan had possessed—for better or worse—the magic touch of Midas. Men less favored by fortune liked to stand in his shadow, hoping to benefit by the fabulous Brannigan luck, but Brannigan himself never knew whether that luck was a boon or a cross he must bear. Even on this bright day, which was to be his and Kate Belan's wedding day, he could not throw aside the responsibilities of being a bonanza king.

"If it's a fight they want," he said bluntly, "they'll get it!"

He jerked open his desk drawer, and took from it a snub-nosed derringer. The weapon was a deadly .45, but it was small and compact and it fitted snugly into Brannigan's great fist. A change had come over the big owner of the Cameo Mining Company, turning him from bridegroom-to-be into fighting man, and it caused a hush to settle over the six men gathered there in the small and grubby office. Behind their sudden silence was timidity, and Sam Brannigan, so recognizing the obvious, eyed the men with a mild contempt.

"This is what you wanted of me, isn't it?" he demanded. "You came here for

more than talk, didn't you? Hell, you can't be gun-shy!"

The six were representative citizens of the reborn and booming silver town of Epitaph, the mining camp called by some men, Brannigan's Town. Four were men directly interested in mining. The fifth was Epitaph's banker and the sixth the town's leading merchant. They were gents whose stake in the town was greatest, men who should fight to the last breath for what was theirs. That they should shrink now from what must be done was to Brannigan almost unbelievable.

Forbes, the banker, said, "Sam, we must move cautiously."

"Meaning just what?" Brannigan demanded.

"Just this," said Forbes. "There's always trouble in a gun."

Brannigan looked at the derringer in his hand, a scowl darkening his heavy face. He looked up again, his eyes flinty. "Trouble?" he said. "That depends upon which end of the gun you're facing."

"You can't fight a railroad with a gun, Sam."

"Forbes, I'll fight the railroad with whatever weapons it takes," Brannigan told the banker. "If you don't stomach a fight, back out." He swept the other five men with his hard look. "That goes for all of you. Side me, or back out. Either way, it doesn't matter. I'm out to save this town—in my own way."

He swung around to take his hat down from its wall peg. Like the black broadcloth suit he wore, the hat was brand new and had been purchased for his and Kate Belan's wedding ceremony and their trip to Frisco. Holding the hat in his hand, he was reminded of what the coming afternoon was to mean to him. To him and Kate Belan. And for an instant, his resolve wavered. He could see with his mind's eye what might happen if he went forth with a gun. Kate Belan might well become a widow before she became a wife, and his fine wedding rig might be instead his burial garb. One word might have stayed him, but there behind him Stace Forbes was saying, "Sam, I'm with you."

Brannigan swung around. "And you others?"

"We'll side you, Sam," said Hanlon, a mine owner.

The other four men nodded.

Big Sam Brannigan smiled. "No man yet went wrong by siding me," he said heartily, and he turned toward the door. It swung open before he reached it, and there in the opening stood Kate Belan.

MEN called Kate Belan the Belle of Epitaph Town. In any but a rowdy mining camp, Kate's social status might have been a dubious one. She was a honkatonk girl. She was half owner of The Paradise Cabaret, the town's biggest pleasure palace. But there was a quality about Kate Belan which lifted her above the cheap and the tawdry.

She was a mature woman to whom the bloom of youth and beauty still clung. There was a warmth and a genuine air of fineness about her, and the men of Epitaph swore she was twenty-four carat. Kate Belan was loved, by more men than Sam Brannigan. Now her presence in the office doorway was a disturbing thing. Brannigan did not know what to say in greeting. He had not expected to see her until the wedding ceremony.

"Sam, I heard there is trouble," Kate Belan said, and her voice was edged with alarm. "You're not going?"

"A small thing, Kate. It will be quickly settled."

"It will get out of hand. I know. I feel it."

Brannigan frowned, knowing what a woman's intuition could be and frightened by it. He wanted nothing to happen before Kate and he were married, for already they had wasted far too much of their lives—he after his quest for wealth and power, and Kate leading a life she did not wholly relish. Again his resolution wavered, but once more Stace Forbes' few words swayed him. The banker said, "Sam, we'll wait for you outside," and led the others from the office.

Alone with Kate Belan, Brannigan would have taken her in his arms. But Kate placed her hands against his chest and kept him at arm's length.

"Sam, must you go through with this?" she asked.

"For myself, no," Brannigan told her. "For the others, for the town—yes. You know how it is, Kate! Epitaph is the life and the hopes of nearly four thousand people, and there is some wealth here for them all—providing the railroad interests are

kept from getting a stranglehold on the town. I'm responsible for seeing that Epitaph isn't turned back into a ghost town. . . ." He swore a round oath, and Kate being Kate was not shocked. "Damn the greed of some men! You know what's happening, Kate?"

"The thing that has been happening all over the west," Kate said, "since the building of the Sierra-Pacific Railroad. By charging high freight rates, and raising them higher and higher all the time, the owners of the Sierra-Pacific are trying to control all mining and ranching and lumbering. They want to share in the profits of every man's enterprises."

"A tinhorn game, Kate!" Brannigan said softly.

"And you're the man to fight it, Sam."

Brannigan reached out and put his big hands on Kate's slim shoulders, and he beamed with pride. "You're not asking me to keep out of this fight, Kate. You feel as I do, that Epitaph is my responsibility. God bless you for that, my dear."

"It's just that we have waited so many years, Sam," Kate whispered. "But go now, before I break down like a woman and beg you not to go."

She permitted him to hold her in his arms then. She kissed him lightly, and then gave him a little push toward the door. Brannigan crossed the room and swung open the door. He looked back over his shoulder, and winced inwardly. For Kate Belan had not expected him to look back. She had permitted her feelings to show, and there was a despairing look in her blue eyes. Sam Brannigan knew then that she believed he was going to his death.

CHAPTER TWO

A Hard Man Takes Back-Water

STEPPING from his office, Brannigan said, "Gentlemen, let's go," and he turned north along Epitaph's hodge-podge main street with the six troubled men at his heels. It was a street bustling with people and horses and wagons of all kinds. Since the town's new lease on life, it had grown and swelled in mushroom fashion until it rivalled even Virginia City.

And the boomers still came, day after day. It seemed that wherever Sam Branni-

gan went, a motley crowd followed. The simple faith people had in his luck was for Brannigan an amazing thing. But this day, striding toward the edge of Epitaph, his mind was giving no thought to the fact that his actions shaped the destiny of other men. His mind looked ahead to what he must do. He was not misled. Banker Forbes had a right to be timid and urge caution, for to buck the railroad interests meant trouble. And what happened now, within the hour, would be the spark to set off a powder charge. The ensuing blast would be a terrific thing.

The Sierra-Pacific had built in along the foothills to Epitaph less than six months ago. Brannigan, like all the town, had welcomed its coming, for there had been a promise of cheap and fast transportation and hauling; it had seemed that Epitaph Town was at last linked with the outside world.

But once the Sierra-Pacific had put the stage company and the freighting firms out of business, it had skyrocketed its rates until no merchant or miner could ship freight at a profit. It was a tinhorn game the railroad owners were playing everywhere their web of steel rails reached; they were greedy men trying to bleed the whole land. Of the men who had fought back, not a one had won out. The Sierra-Pacific was too strong, too all-powerful, too unscrupulous. Sam Brannigan well knew what he was up against.

To combat the railroad, Brannigan had already taken one step. He had reorganized the stage line. He had bought up mules and freight wagons, hired drovers, to haul Epitaph's freight. Promptly, the Sierra-Pacific had struck back.

Brannigan was beyond the edge of town, now, following the road that descended Silver Knob Hill. Halfway down, he halted with his followers and, with angry eyes, surveyed what lay below. Brannigan had a panoramic view: the old wagon road and the new railroad ran parallel to each other along the floor of narrow Ute Canyon to cross roaring Fry Pan Creek over the timber span of Silver Knob Bridge. Due to the formation of the rock cliffs, there was but one entrance to Epitaph by rail or road and that was by way of the wooden bridge. It was a narrow span, so narrow that when a Sierra-Pacific train was passing over it no

wagon could use the crossing. And now the railroad, striking back at Sam Brannigan and his town, had stalled an engine upon the bridge. Brannigan muttered an oath.

"They've got a stranglehold on our throats," he said.

"What can we do, Sam?" Banker Forbes asked.

"We'll move that damned engine."

"It's guarded by armed hardcases from Frisco," said Mike Hanlon.

Brannigan nodded. "That's why I brought a gun," he said, and he moved on down Silver Knob.

A DOZEN ore-laden freight rigs bound for the stamping mill at Virginia City were stalled on the Epitaph side of the bridge. On the far side were half a dozen wagons piled high with supplies badly needed by the town's always hungry population, they too stalled by the blocked span. The burly muleskinners on the near side gathered in a group as Sam Brannigan and his followers strode up. They eyed Brannigan expectantly, knowing that in him they had a leader.

One bearded driver, Red Burke, said, "You want us to rush those gunslicks, Mister Brannigan? You say the word, and we'll throw them into the Fry Pan."

The big man smiled in spite of the trouble goading him. He knew this breed of horny-fisted men that tooled heavy freight rigs through the mountains. They could and would fight, and it was a safe bet that in a knock-down, drag-out brawl they could toss the railroad gun-guards from Silver Knob Bridge into the deep gorge of Fry Pan Creek.

But Brannigan shook his head, "I'll handle this, Burke." He did not want any of these muleskinners shot down by hired Frisco gunmen.

"It's a tricky game," he said, speaking so each man in the group could hear. "If we crowd those hardcases, they'll open fire—and some of us will die. I'm going to try a bluff. If it works, we'll take over the bridge and put our own armed guards on it. If it doesn't work—" He broke off and shrugged. If he failed in his bluff, he at least would not need to worry about what came after today.

He turned abruptly, moving toward the bridge, and he saw two hard-visaged men

lounging there come erect and settle their chill gaze upon him. Brannigan felt the warmth of the sun and he saw the rugged beauty of the rock hills. The earth was solid and good beneath his boots. The crisp mountain air was clean and bracing as he filled his lungs. He wanted to turn and look once more upon ugly, rowdy Epitaph town, but instead he wondered if ever a man had regretted dying for his home, his town, his land. He thought of Kate Belan and of her warmth and beauty, and knew that her fear in this moment must be greater than his own. And so he came to Silver Knob Bridge.

"You, mister! This bridge is closed."

The hardcase who spoke was a man as big as Sam Brannigan. He stood spread-legged, with hand on holstered sixgun, blocking Brannigan's way. His partner, a lean and scar-faced man, sided him in the same manner, feet braced, hand to gun. Brannigan eyed the bigger of the two and saw upon the hardened face the marks of a lifetime of wanton excess. There was no mistaking that the pair would kill for pay.

"Who the hell are you?" Brannigan demanded.

"Railroad guards," the burly hardcase said, and showed a mirthless grin. "We got a broken down engine here, and we're guarding it—it being Sierra-Pacific property."

"How many of you guards?" asked Brannigan, hating the man and what he stood for. "You and your partner, and how many others?"

"There's eight of us, mister."

"Eight against a town of four thousand, eh? Friend, when you die here curse the railroad. Who's the man ramrodding your crew?"

Just for an instant, the hardcase's eyes had narrowed down and there had been a glimmer of alarm in their muddy depths. But now he laughed, and said, "Bring your town, Brannigan. We'll stop it with our guns. Cal Purcell is ramrodding us, if it matters to you."

"I'll see him," Brannigan said, and stepping forward, shoved the man out of his way. He saw the hardcase draw his sixgun, heard his muttered curse. He added, "You kill me, friend, and you'll hang. Why, you fool, you're in a trap. You can't get away from here!"

That struck home. The two hardcases exchanged uncertain looks, then swung around toward the group of watching mule-skinner and townsmen, as though expecting to be rushed. Brannigan walked on with his heart pounding. He'd won the first trick. But the next might be another matter.

Four men were standing about the stalled locomotive and tender. Two other men—the engineer and fireman—were up in the locomotive's cab. Of the four gun-guards, three were of the same stripe as the two guarding the bridge's end. The fourth was a dark lean man of somber expression clad in a checked gray suit and wearing a broad brimmed black hat, and Brannigan took him for Cal Purcell.

"You're head of this gun crew?"

"That's right," came the reply. "I'm Purcell, Sierra-Pacific trouble-shooter. What's on your mind, Mister Brannigan?"

"You know as well as I do, Purcell. I want this bridge cleared."

"How? This locomotive is broken down."

"I'll move it," said Brannigan. He took a cigar from his pocket and offered it to Purcell, but the railroad man shook his head in refusal. Brannigan clamped the cigar between his own teeth and began fumbling through his pockets as if in search of a match. "In fact, Purcell, I am going to move this engine before the sun goes down today."

Purcell's eyes were pale, almost colorless, a poker player's eyes. His coat hung open and beneath, belted to his side, was a holstered gun. It occurred to Sam Brannigan that Cal Purcell was the most dangerous of this crew. The trouble-shooter was shrewd and most likely had no nerves. Brannigan kept hunting for a match.

"It's like this," he said easily, more easy in his talk than he felt with those hardcases watching him. "I don't like gun-play and bloodshed. Neither do I like to see a town starve—"

"No need for Epitaph to starve, Brannigan," Purcell interrupted. "The Sierra-Pacific will haul in all the food and supplies your town needs. All that you need do is pay the rates."

"Thieving rates, Purcell."

"The company bosses in Sacramento fix the rates, not I."

"I've already told them to go to hell."

"You'll change your tune, then," said Purcell. "Hell, man; your people have to eat. Your mines have to get their ore to the stamp mill. How long do you think Epitaph will last, if this keeps up?"

"It's not keeping up," Brannigan said. He found a match at last, but it flickered out before he lifted it to his cigar. He reached into his coat pocket as for another—and brought out his derringer.

Purcell cursed, but the derringer was already jabbed against his belly. And Sam Brannigan was saying, "It's ending now, Purcell. I'm clearing this bridge. Sure; you can have one of your gunslicks shoot me down, but you'll die with me." He looked squarely into the trouble-shooter's chill eyes. "You ready to give your life to a bunch of greed-prodded men in Sacramento, Purcell—or do you want to live? Talk, man! Take your choice!"

Purcell's breathing was suddenly fluttering, and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. "Damn you, Brannigan!" he muttered. Then: "This is the first time I've fallen down on the job. All right, you win this hand. But there'll be another, Brannigan. There'll be another hand!"

Brannigan kept the cocked derringer pressed against the man. He said, "Tell your crew to holster their guns, Purcell. Tell them to start moving out. You've got steam up, so move that engine!"

CHAPTER THREE

"Kate . . . Will Never Marry You."

IT TOOK only a short time for the engine to back off Silver Knob Bridge with the gunmen aboard. Sam Brannigan kept Purcell covered until the funnel-stacked locomotive was roaring away through Ute Canyon, then released the trouble-shooter to find his own way away from the trouble-freed span. Purcell had warned, "I'll be back, Brannigan," and now was trudging north along the Sierra-Pacific roadbed. And the big boss of Epitaph town knew that he had made a dangerous enemy. Brannigan had no doubt at all that Clay Purcell would return.

But now, as Brannigan walked from the bridge, a cheer rang out. The crowd, now swollen by many men from town, swarmed about him. He was slapped on the back,

and his hand grasped many times. But if the crowd was jubilant, Brannigan was not. He knew that this was the beginning of trouble, not the ending.

He started back toward town, the crowd trailing him, and suddenly he found a man—a stranger—beside him and trying to match his long stride. Brannigan automatically slowed his pace, for the stranger was slightly lame and it was difficult for him to move so rapidly. The man was young, perhaps in his late twenties, and he was pale and thin—with an odd, hungry look about him. He wore city clothes that showed long and hard wear. But it was the stranger's eyes that impressed Brannigan. They were eyes too large for his face, a baby blue in color, and they seemed full of a childish wonder.

"Mister Brannigan, I'm Homer Wade."

Brannigan offered his hand. "Glad to know you, Wade," he said, and, without knowing why, he was glad to know Homer Wade. "You're new to Epitaph, eh? What's your business, friend?"

"I'm a newspaperman, sir."

"So?" Brannigan grinned. "For, or against, me?"

"I'm a reporter for the San Francisco *Dispatch*," Wade said earnestly. "I reckon you know that paper. Its policy is to fight the greedy interests that control the Sierra-Pacific Railroad." He was such a serious young man that he did not return Brannigan's grin. "So I guess that makes the two of us fighting on the same side. The *Dispatch* editor sent me down here to ask you some questions, sir, if you don't mind. . . ."

Brannigan stopped and faced the reporter, letting the crowd go on. He at last lighted up his cigar, and he offered one to Homer Wade. The cigar was refused, for Wade seemed too excited to smoke. He pulled a folded newspaper from his coat pocket and, opening it, held it so that Brannigan might read one of its headlines. The headline read:

NEVADA MINING INTERESTS TO
RUN BIG SAM BRANNIGAN FOR
U. S. SENATE

Brannigan frowned, and said, "That's news to me."

"It's true," Wade assured him. "On my

way here, I stopped in Carson City and talked to politicians there. They're going to approach you with this in mind. They believe that with a man like you in Washington, conditions in Nevada—and even in California—would improve. They want a fighter to buck the Sierra-Pacific."

Homer Wade paused, breathless from talking so fast. Then: "I'm new here, sure. But I know some things you should know, Mister Brannigan."

"Such as?"

"Well, one thing is that the Sierra-Pacific has hired a tinhorn operator to ruin you. His name is Lou Jennifer, and he's shrewd and tough, and he hates your guts."

"Hates me, eh?" Brannigan said. "I never heard of him."

"He's in Epitaph now," Wade went on. "He planned this bridge-block game that was pulled today. But he's keeping under cover."

Brannigan said, "One question, Wade. Why does this tinhorn, Lou Jennifer, hate my guts?"

Wade's oddly innocent eyes stared at Brannigan. "I was going to ask you that question, Mister Brannigan. You sure you don't know?"

Brannigan probed his memory but still recalled no Lou Jennifer. He said, "What else do you know, Wade?" And the newspaperman from Frisco said, "I know this, Brannigan—the gamblers along Blue Chip Row are betting that Kate Belan will never marry you."

BRANNIGAN plucked the cigar from his mouth and stared at this seedy young man who called himself Homer Wade and claimed to be a newspaperman from Frisco. He said, "Wade, I think you're a damn liar." Yet he somehow knew that Wade was speaking the truth.

"Think what you like," Wade told him. "It's no skin off my nose. You'll find out soon enough that you're being bucked by a man who'll ruin you. Lou Jennifer is out to get you, one way or another. And it's his money the gamblers are betting. Don't take my word for it, Brannigan. Hunt up Jennifer and make him lay his cards on the table."

"I'll do just that," Brannigan said.

He flung away his cigar and turned up Silver Knob, moving with such long strides

that Wade could not keep up. At the top of the grade, where Epitaph town began to sprawl in wild confusion over the flats, he had to move aside for the passage of an outbound stagecoach. He gave the fast moving Concord hardly a glance, and it went rolling down Silver Knob behind its six Spanish mules and trailing a yellow cloud of dust.

Like many another boomtown, Epitaph might have been planned—had it been laid out at all—by a half-witted architect. It had no definite pattern, but was a crazy

quilt of frame false-fronts, shack-like houses, tents, and ramshackle lean-tos.

Blue Chip Row was a solid block of gambling deadfalls at the north end of the main street, and it was toward the Row that Brannigan now made his way. It was close to two o'clock now, which permitted Brannigan two hours before the wedding ceremony. He turned into a deadfall called Gordon's Place, and Ed Gordon, the enormously fat proprietor, sat at a table lazily dealing himself a hand of solitaire. This early in the afternoon, the place had but

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PROCESS

one patron, a Mexican, who stood talking to the bartender. Brannigan crossed the dingy room to halt before Fat Ed Gordon.

"Ed, some money was placed with you to bet that my marriage to Kate Belan wouldn't take place," he said flatly. "That right?"

"Could be, Sam," muttered the fat man.

"Who placed that money with you?"

"A gent named Jennifer . . . Lou Jennifer."

Brannigan was jolted, even though he had guessed that Homer Wade had told the truth. He said, "Ed, you know and I know that this is my town. When a man takes sides against me, he's apt to lose his place in Epitaph. You savvy?"

Fat Ed Gordon studied his cards, and said, not looking up, "Brannigan, the way I hear it, you're done in this town."

Brannigan's face turned dark with rage, but he merely said, "Where do I find this Lou Jennifer?" And he received Gordon's short answer: "Try Lemoyne's place."

Brannigan strode from that first dead-fall, and Lemoyne's saloon and gambling hall was farther along Blue Chip Row. It boasted batwing doors, and Brannigan, shouldering his way inside, found half a dozen men lounging there.

Ace Lemoyne was as thin as Ed Gordon was fat; he was sallow of skin and beady-eyed. Lemoyne sat at a back table with two men, and the three halted their talk to gaze at Brannigan. There was no need for Brannigan to inquire about a man named Lou Jennifer. Ace Lemoyne rose and drifted away from the table. The second man, a dark faced, cold-eyed hardcase, stood and backed to the bar, where he lounged with a definite wariness. The third man kept his chair.

Brannigan crossed the room. "You're Jennifer?"

"At your service, Mister Brannigan."

"I've been hearing talk about you, Jennifer."

"Talk you don't like, maybe?"

"Talk I don't like," said Brannigan, and took a chair at the table.

SEATED across from Lou Jennifer, he could watch both the mystery man and the hardcase backed up against the bar. Ace Lemoyne he ignored, for he knew that the deadfall owner was a petty operator. He

took out a fresh cigar, using the time it took to light up to brace himself and to study Jennifer. He had not recognized the man's name, and now he was certain that he never had seen Jennifer before.

Like Brannigan himself, Jennifer was a big and bulky man. They were of an age, in their middle forties. Jennifer was a swarthy man, coarsely handsome, and a streak of white through his black hair gave him a somewhat distinguished look. His eyes were a metallic gray about a hooked nose, and his mouth was thin and had a twisted way of grinning. He was vain in dress, fancying the sort of dapper clothes a gambler with a run of luck might choose. Sam Brannigan could judge men, and he knew that Lou Jennifer was not a man to underestimate.

"I like to know my enemies, Jennifer," he said bluntly. "I'm told you're out to smash me, that you hate my guts. I'm told, too, that you are in the hire of the money interests that control the Sierra-Pacific."

"I hire out, Brannigan, but I'm still my own man."

"Then you have a price?"

"Not one you could pay," said Jennifer, and in his voice was a malignant hatred. "I come a dollar higher than you can offer."

Brannigan said, "I'm not trying to buy you off, I'm feeling you out. Lay your cards on the table, Jennifer. What reason do you have for hating me?"

The man's grin was gone, and he stared narrowly at Brannigan. He said, "That's for you to figure out, Brannigan. But I'll tell you this: Before I'm done with you, you'll be crawling small in the dirt instead of walking big in the sun. Damn you, Brannigan, you've been too big too long!" He rose so abruptly that his chair went tumbling over. "Marry Kate Belan, will you? Run for U. S. Senate, will you?" He shook his head in violent denial. "Not you, Brannigan, not you!"

Brannigan slammed the table top with his fist. "You fool! If you've got something against me, come out with it!" He too got to his feet. "Or haven't you got the guts?"

He kicked out and sent the table overturning, clearing the way so that they could get at each other. But from over at the bar, the hardcase said, flatly, "Brannigan, I'm paid to gun-guard Lou Jennifer. Pull in your horns, before I earn my pay."

Brannigan shot a glance toward the hard-case and saw that he had drawn and levelled his sixgun. He looked back at Jennifer, and said, "So that's how you play your tinhorn game?"

"I'm not a man for saloon brawls, Brannigan."

Brannigan said, "It's a game two can play at, Jennifer," and he turned and walked from Lemoyne's deadfall.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gamblers Call the Turn

THE Frisco newspaperman, Homer Wade, was waiting outside the gambling place. He tugged at Brannigan's coat sleeve, and asked, "I was right, wasn't I, Mister Brannigan?" And, when ignored, he limped along the street after Brannigan. Lost in angry thoughts, Brannigan did not notice how men along the street stared at him. He was thinking, "A hell of a day for a man's wedding day," and so came to the little frame building that housed his office and living quarters. He shoved open the door, then halted as he noticed the envelope that lay on the floor. It had been pushed under the door while he was away. He stooped and picked it up, and sharp alarm went through him as he recognized the neat handwriting upon the face of the envelope. It was a note from Kate Belan.

His mind asked, Why should Kate write to me? while his suddenly trembling fingers tore open the envelope. He drew out the single sheet of notepaper and unfolded it. And with shocked eyes read:

Sam: I cannot marry you. I cannot even see you, ever again. I am going away, far away from Epitaph, and you must not try to find me. I beg you not to try. This has got to be good-bye. Kate.

Brannigan lifted a hand and drew it across his eyes, and then, disbelieving, read the note a second time. His mind rocked, and for an instant he was like a man beaten hard about the head. He was unaware that Homer Wade had followed him into the office, until the reporter said, "Something wrong, Sam?"

"Kate. . . . Kate Belan," Brannigan muttered. "She's left Epitaph."

"How? On the stage?"

Brannigan's mind cleared. He swung around and ran out the door. He headed across the street to the building in which he had set up the office of the reorganized stageline. He found old Jeb Layman lounging in the office doorway, and he almost shouted: "Kate Belan— Was she aboard the outbound stage?"

Jeb Layman spat and drawled, "Yep; she was, Mister Brannigan."

Wildness gripped Sam Brannigan, then, driving reason from his mind. And when Homer Wade came limping up to say, "I could have told you, Sam. Lou Jennifer got her to leave," Brannigan went berserk. He caught hold of Wade, by the throat, and tried to choke the truth from the man.

BRANNIGAN had a one-handed grip on his victim, but on so frail a man as Homer Wade such a grip was sufficient to strangle. Wade's eyes began to bulge and his thin face grew livid. "Talk, you!" Brannigan raged. "You know so damned much, so talk!"

Layman shouted, "Sam, let up—you'll kill that jigger!" Two other men came running, and they grabbed Brannigan and forcibly broke his throttling grip. Wade slumped to the ground. Coming to his senses, Sam Brannigan reeled back. He rubbed his hand over his eyes, like a man trying to wipe away a nightmarish scene. Men came running from every direction, and began asking excited questions. They started to form a crowd around Brannigan, but he forced his way through and stumbled back across the street toward his office. . . . Down by Blue Chip Row, the dudish Lou Jennifer stood in front of Lemoyne's deadfall and watched with shrewd eyes and a twisted grin. Brannigan pushed into his office and slammed the door after him. He slumped into a chair and held his head in his hands, a man tormented.

The wall clock ticked away the minutes, and finally struck four tinny notes. Four o'clock . . . the hour the wedding ceremony was to have been held. Deep in despair, Sam Brannigan was unaware of the time. . . .

The Carson City politicians—a three man committee charged with obtaining Sam Brannigan's consent to run for the United States Senate—arrived at Epitaph by stage the next morning. They were men of influence, civic leaders, and politically they

controlled the silver state of Nevada. They came prepared to offer arguments as to why Brannigan should serve the State in Washington. They were disappointed, for their man was in an unreceptive mood. Pacing to and fro like a caged animal, Brannigan shot their arguments full of holes.

"I can't risk it," he said. "I've already got a fight on my hands here in Epitaph. I've got to fight the Sierra-Pacific crowd to keep my town from being picked clean. My private affairs are under attack." He muttered an oath. "Even the woman I was to marry has been driven from me. Be a crusader, you say? Why, I'm as helpless as a man about to be 'dobe-walled!'"

The three men from Carson would have renewed their arguments, but now a commotion broke out on the street. Men were talking loudly as they ran past the Cameo Mining Company's office. One halted to knock upon the door. Brannigan crossed the room and opened, and Jock Langley, the town marshal, was the man who had knocked.

"Brannigan, all hell has broken loose up Fry Pan Creek," the old lawman said. "You'd better come along."

Sam Brannigan asked no questions, but he had the disturbing premonition that here again was some ugly happening that concerned him personally. He turned to take up his hat, and he said to the Carson City politicians, "I'll let you know my final decision in a day or two."

He walked out to join Jock Langley, and the marshal had a horse and buggy waiting. The two men climbed into the vehicle, Langley taking the reins and putting the livery stable horse into a trot. All of Epitaph town seemed on the move. Men were hurrying north through the town, along a narrow road that led deep into the ore hills.

Brannigan said, "What is all this, Jock?"

Always before, he had counted Jock Langley as his man. It had been he who had brought the old lawman in from Virginia City to enforce some law on rowdy Epitaph. But now he saw how the marshal's leathery face tightened up, and knew that here again he had lost someone who had been close to him.

When Langley finally spoke, he said, "Sam, let me ask you a question. Why did Kate Belan leave town?"

"Jock, so help me—I don't know."

"She maybe found out something about you, something ugly?"

"Like what, Jock?"

"Like murder, Sam," Jock Langley said.

Brannigan grabbed the reins and hauled the trotting horse to a stop. He put a heavy hand on the lawman's shoulder, and forced Langley to face him. "Out with it, Jock," he ordered. "What's happened now?"

Langley sighed and shook his head, then said slowly, "Sam, I've known you for twenty-odd years, and I'd swear you're as straight as men come. But out on Fry Pan Creek, some prospectors opened the old diggings at Shamrock Slope. Your old diggings, Sam. You recollect?"

Brannigan's hand slipped from the lawman's shoulder. He nodded dully, and said, "I remember." And before either he or Jock Langley spoke again, his mind leapt back across time to more than twenty years before. He had been a young bucko, then, just beginning to come into the now fabulous Brannigan luck. He had been prospecting these hills, along with two of the best partners any man ever had: Dutch Lamber and Ben Rudd. Their prospecting had led them to Shamrock Slope, and there they had found a bonanza.

Back in those early days, men had dreamed more of gold than of silver. And the three partners had run a tunnel deep into Shamrock Slope. It had been back-breaking toil, but they struck color finally. It had been a heavy vein, a bonanza. It had been decided that an assay should be made. Young Sam Brannigan had been chosen to travel to Virginia City with specimens, while Lamber and Rudd remained at the mine to continue the digging and to guard the strike. Brannigan had been gone two weeks, and when he returned he found that disaster had struck the Shamrock.

A great landslide had sealed the mine, burying his partners alive as they worked deep in the shaft. Grief-stricken, Brannigan had let the mine be their grave. He had erected a rock cairn to the memory of Dutch Lamber and Ben Rudd. Then he had gone his way, never returning to unlucky Shamrock Slope. He had told the story of the disaster to only a few men, and one of them was Jock Langley. In those days, Langley had been U. S. marshal, and he had taken young Sam Brannigan's word, believing that a landslide had snuffed out

the lives of these two unfortunate men. "You did right by not disturbing the dead," Langley had said.

But now more than twenty years were gone, and the same Jock Langley was eying Sam Brannigan with open suspicion.

"I haven't been out there yet," the lawman said. "I only know what some fool came shouting—that some prospectors reopened that old mine and found the remains of Lamber and Rudd."

Brannigan said thickly, "You said something about murder."

"The hombre who came riding to town with the news claimed Lamber and Rudd had been murdered," Langley told him. "Both men, he swore, had been shot through the head."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Sign at Shamrock Slope

BRANNIGAN, didn't, wouldn't, believe it. There had been a landslide, and the mine had been blotted out by tons of rock and shale and gravel. Brannigan had seen that, after the slide. He said, as Langley started the rig, "It can't be true. Murder? Why, Lamber and Rudd weren't men who'd be caught flat-footed and shot down."

"We'll soon see," Langley muttered, and cracked his buggy whip.

Two miles along the narrow road, they had to leave the rig and go on afoot. Shamrock Slope was a mile and more back from the road, deep in a barren canyon. Other men from town were making their way back into the canyon, through the rocks and tangled brush, and Brannigan saw, as he and

Langley neared Shamrock, that at least a hundred men were already gathered before the new tunnel run into the slope. They were men gripped by a morbid curiosity, sensation-seekers.

Ignoring the assembled crowd, Brannigan surveyed the slope. It rose some two hundred feet in a sharp slant, and the debris of rock and gravel from the landslide still blotted out the base of the rock cliff. The new tunnel had been dug straight in through the vast pile of loose rocks and gravel. Whoever the prospectors were, they had done an expert mining job. Brannigan saw that it was a timbered tunnel.

Two bearded men stood guarding the tunnel's mouth, and Jock Langley told Brannigan, "The Crewson brothers. They opened the mine."

As Brannigan and the lawman drew near, one of the Crewson brothers said, "Been trying to keep the crowd out until you got here, Jock. We figured the law should see what we found inside. You want to take a look?"

Langley nodded, and followed the bearded man as he took up a lantern and entered the mine. Sam Brannigan moved after them, seeing by the lantern's glow that the timbering in the tunnel was as substantial a job as that in his own Cameo Mine. And the thought occurred to him that it had taken far more than the work of two men. He was mining man enough to know that the Crewsons had had help in reopening Shamrock Slope.

They had followed the tunnel for perhaps a hundred feet when Crewson said, in a hushed voice, "Here it is, gents, and not a pretty sight."

Sam Brannigan took one look, then



turned his head. He had seen enough. Bits of rags still clung to the skeletons which the lantern light revealed. And Brannigan's one brief glance had convinced him of the truth of the murder report. Each of the two skulls was pierced by a bullet hole. Jock Langley looked much longer, because it was his duty to make sure, but finally he too turned away. He said, "They were murdered. There's no denying that."

He was looking at Sam Brannigan, and his eyes were full of accusation. It was clear that he believed Brannigan had killed his partners.

SOME of the crowd worked their way into the mine, to stare at what was there and to mutter in outraged tones over the ugly thing that had happened twenty-odd years ago.

"Damned drygulcher," Sam Brannigan heard one man growl. "Me, I'd like to help string him up!"

Jock Langley told Ike Crewson, "Bury them, soon as you can," and took Brannigan by the arm to lead him out into the sun. For the big man, it was like coming from the land of the dead into that of the living. He was shaken, unnerved. So much had happened all in one day; his trouble with the Sierra-Pacific gun-crew, Kate Belan's unexplained departure, and now this grisly discovery, that his mind was dazed. He stumbled once, over a rock, and would have fallen had not Langley supported him. And then, outside the mine, the rest of the crowd—swollen now by more men from town—gathered around him and the lawman.

"Jock," a man asked, "what'd you see in there?"

"Just what the talk said I'd find," Jock Langley said, bitterly. "Lamber and Rudd were dead before the landslide closed the tunnel—dead as hell. They'd been shot through the head."

A bewhiskered old prospector muttered, "I knew those two hombres." He was peering at Big Sam Brannigan. "Partners of yours, weren't they?"

Brannigan nodded, dully.

"You know who drygulched them?"

Brannigan faced the old-timer, and said in sudden rage, "If I knew, I'd do something about it. Dutch Lamber and Ben Rudd were more than my partners. They were my friends."

His words rang in an empty silence, and the crowd stared at him with a suspicion so apparent it did not need to be put into words. And in that silence, the temper of the crowd changed. The friendliness Sam Brannigan had known since Epitaph was reborn now turned, all in an instant, to hostility. Brannigan felt it, for that hostility was directed at him. The same suspicion that Jock Langley had shown was now in the eyes of these other men, these very men who, for months, had respected and admired the big boss of Epitaph town. Even to Brannigan's shock-dazed mind, it was evident that these men were realizing that because of his luck they never had trusted him. Because of his wealth they had envied—and perhaps hated—him deep in their small minds. The awareness of it panicked Brannigan.

"You fools!" he shouted. "You think I killed them?"

There was a hardcase man back at the edge of the gathering, and he now exchanged a look with the second Crewson brother. Then he said, "Maybe you did kill them, Brannigan, for what gold you knew was in the mine. Maybe you lost your nerve, afterwards, and tried to cover up your killings by starting that landslide with a powder blast!"

Brannigan lunged at the man, shoving his way through the crowd. But he was stopped abruptly, for Jock Langley caught him by the arms from behind.

"Ease up, Sam," the lawman said. "You can't afford to make enemies, the fix you're in."

Brannigan swung around. "What you mean, the fix I'm in?"

Jock Langley sighed, and muttered, "Sorry, Sam. But I'm duty-bound to arrest you for the murder of Dutch Lamber and Ben Rudd."

The muttered acclaim of the crowd rumbled in Brannigan's ears. He heard a voice curse, and say, "We ought to string him up. Give him a trial, he'll fetch in fork-tongued lawyers and wriggle out of this. You gents agree?"

The crowd was undecided, though a few men nodded and one called out, "We've got a rope, we can find a high enough tree." But Jock Langley drew his sixgun, and warned, "Me, I won't stand by and see a lynching!"

The old lawman shoved his prisoner through the crowd, and he was in a sudden hurry to get Brannigan away from Shamrock Slope.

CHAPTER SIX

Frame for a Kingpin Fighter

IT WOULD have been an easy thing for Brannigan, once he sat beside Jock Langley in the buggy and headed for town, to overpower the old lawman and make his escape. But Brannigan had always met trouble head on, and he gave no thought now to flight. His mind had cleared. The threat of the crowd had roused him to fighting pitch, and he realized that only by fighting could he save himself from the hang-rope and clear his name. Before the two of them were halfway to Epitaph, Sam Brannigan was planning his defenses.

"Jock, for old times' sake," he said, "you've got to believe that I didn't kill Lamber and Rudd. Hell, man; you know I'm no killer!"

Langley said, "Sam, I can't keep you from talking."

"You're an old lawdog," Brannigan went on. "You've seen more than one man framed. . . . And I tell you, I'm being framed. A blind man could see it. Too much has happened to me all at once for it to be mere bad luck. First, the Sierra-Pacific makes war on Epitaph—my town. That locomotive blocking Silver Knob Bridge this morning wasn't broken down. It was deliberately stalled there to block the Epitaph stage and freight wagons. You agree, Jock?"

"Could be," the lawman admitted.

"Then there was Kate throwing me over and leaving town," Brannigan went on. "She went away before word was spread about the finding of Lamber and Rudd. So there was some other reason for her jilting me."

"Unless she'd been told beforehand what was to be found at Shamrock Slope," Jock Langley said grudgingly. "You think that, Sam?"

"It might be. And if she was told—"

"Then somebody knew that those two men had been murdered."

"That's it, Jock. Somebody knew. The man who's trying to frame me knew. And

since he knew, he must have been there twenty years ago when Lamber and Rudd were murdered." Brannigan's deep voice was husky with a growing excitement. He was a man grasping at a straw of hope. "The Sierra-Pacific doesn't want me to run for the Senate, knowing that I'll fight for the silver interests and buck the railroad. And there's a man in Epitaph who is in the hire of the Sierra-Pacific."

"That dude, Lou Jennifer?"

"A tinhorn operator, Jock," Brannigan said. "And he gave me fair warning. He told em today that he hates my guts, that he's out to smash me." They were nearing town, now, and Brannigan talked faster. "Those Crewson brothers don't look like prospectors to me. Besides, there was more work in that tunnel than two men could have done. I'd gamble that they had plenty of help. Damned funny, too, that they should have run a tunnel into Shamrock Slope—if they weren't sure it would pay off. I say those hombres are in Jennifer's hire. Those two men and that hardcased stranger who made the talk that I'd maybe killed Lamber and Rudd. It was too pat, Jock. Somebody's shrewd hand was behind it, and I'm blaming that on Jennifer."

"What's his reason for hating you, Sam?"

"So help me, I don't know," Brannigan said. "I never saw the man before today. You know anything about him, Jock?"

"Only that he's connected with the Sierra-Pacific," Langley said.

"There's one man who might know. That Frisco newspaperman, Homer Wade." Brannigan grasped the lawman's arm. "Find Wade for me, Jock. Find him for me, and I'll get the truth out of him!"

Jock Langley nodded. "I'll see what can be done." He was a man only half convinced.

THE buggy swung along Epitaph's crooked street and came to a halt before the bleak frame building that housed the marshal's office and a cell block. Since most of the town's population had hurried up to the scene of the find, only a few men appeared to ask questions of Jock Langley. Lou Jennifer and his hardcased gun-guard stepped down from the porch of the Grand Hotel and crossed the street to listen. Climbing down from the buggy, Brannigan faced

Jennifer. His eyes were hard and cold. "It's working out like you planned, Jennifer."

"What you mean, like I planned?" Jennifer said. He was concentrating on lighting a cheroot, but his steely eyes were bright and alert. "You think I had something to do with that business at Shamrock Slope?"

"I think it, and I know it," Brannigan said. "And before I'm done, I'll prove it. I'm warning you, Jennifer, I'll dig into your past and I'll find enough there to put the rope you plan for me around your neck."

"You've always been a big talker, Brannigan," Jennifer said, and turned away.

Brannigan stared after him, and he had the wild thought, *He's sure of himself, and he plays a dirty game. There was lynch talk at Shamrock Slope, and there'll be more of it before I'm brought to trial—and that blackleg will be behind it.* He felt Jock Langley's hand on his arm, and he turned to walk into the lock-up. He felt the eyes of the crowd on him as he accompanied the lawman inside, and he knew that they too were hostile. Brannigan would have admitted it to no man, but he was scared.

Langley said, "You armed, Sam?" And Brannigan handed over his derringer. They walked back to the cell block, and Brannigan stepped into the cell the lawman indicated. The heavy barred door slammed closed and was locked. Jock Langley muttered, "Sam, I hate to do this."

Brannigan said, "Find Homer Wade, Jock, that's all I ask."

For the first time in his turbulent life, he knew the helplessness that assails a man behind bars.

Brannigan paced his cell like a caged animal. His mind was in a turmoil, and by some trick it conjured up faces, faces that taunted him. He saw again burly Dutch Lamber and skinny Ben Rudd, ghosts out of the dim past. He saw beauteous Kate Belan, with hurt and disillusionment in her blue eyes—and her golden head was bowed as she turned from him. Then there was the swarthy face of Lou Jennifer, with its metallic eyes and twisted grin. A remarkable face, one a man would remember had he known it in the past. Brannigan's imagination was better than his memory, for he could not place Jennifer.

There were other faces that plagued Big

Sam Brannigan as night came and darkness crept into the cell. The faces of the guards on the Silver Knob Bridge, one of them the Sierra-Pacific trouble-shooter, Cal Purcell—the man who had threatened to come back. There was too the pale face of the Frisco newspaperman, Homer Wade. *Wade!* thought Brannigan, almost despairingly. *Why doesn't Jock Langley fetch Wade?*

It was full dark when the old lawman returned. He came carrying an oil lamp in one hand and a tray of food—Brannigan's evening meal—in the other. He placed the lamp on a wall bracket outside the cell block, then came and unlocked Brannigan's door. He said tiredly, "Grub, Sam," and placed the tray on the cell cot.

BRANNIGAN ignored the food, for he had no appetite. He said, "Jock, did you locate Homer Wade?" And he saw his answer in the lawman's grim-set face. "Jock, what happened?" he demanded.

"All hell is breaking loose in this town," Langley muttered. "And I can't control it. I found Homer Wade, all right—found him dead. Lou Jennifer's man, Slade, started an argument with Wade, then gunned him down. Slade rode out of town in a hurry, before I could put him under arrest. Jennifer wasn't around at the time of the shooting. He's down at the railroad depot, planning something with Cal Purcell, the Sierra-Pacific's trouble-shooter. Purcell came in on a special train, and he brought a crew of maybe fifty toughs with him. I tell you, Sam, trouble is brewing tonight in Epitaph."

Brannigan nodded dully. The news of Wade's death had hit him hard.

Langley went on, "There's too many men in town. They've been coming in from the mines and the diggings ever since word spread about what was found at Shamrock Slope. And there's too much talk."

"Lynch talk?" Brannigan said.

Langley nodded. "It maybe is just talk. But if it gets to be more than just talk, I'll move you out of here in a hurry."

He turned out of the cell, closed and locked the door. He started toward his office out front, then came back. "I've been looking through some old records, here in the marshal's office, Sam," he said slowly. "I found an old dodger issued by the law in

Virginia City, years ago. It's for a hombre named Luke Jarrett, and he was wanted then for stealing from a mining firm he worked for as office clerk. That mean anything to you?"

Brannigan searched his memory, and shook his head in denial.

"Luke Jarrett's description fits Lou Jennifer," Langley went on. "I questioned some old-timers, this evening. One of them—Stace Ranley, who was Kate Belan's partner in their honkatonk—remembered Luke Jarrett. Ranley told me something that may explain why Jarrett, or Jennifer, is out to get you. Sam, you know that Kate was married once?"

Brannigan nodded. "I know. Kate is a widow."

"She's not a widow if Lou Jennifer and Luke Jarrett are one and the same," Jock Langley said. "Because the man Kate Belan married years ago was Luke Jarrett."

Jolted again, Brannigan was unable to make any reply. With Langley gone, he tried to think things out. Kate's flight, her refusal to go through with the marriage, was now understandable. She had learned that the husband she had long believed dead was alive and in Epitaph; the shock of finding that she was not free to marry again must have unnerved her, and so she had fled without any real explanation.

But more than Kate's action was explained. Brannigan now knew why Lou Jennifer—or Jarrett, whatever his name—had gambled that Kate Belan would never marry Sam Brannigan. By the same token, Brannigan understood Jennifer's hate for him. Even though Jennifer had deserted his wife shortly after their ill-fated marriage, and had permitted her to believe him

dead, he still wanted her to bear his brand. Jennifer was a man who would not give up even what he no longer wanted. Or perhaps, Sam Brannigan decided, Jennifer did want Kate Belan. For the Belle of Epitaph was, to all men, desirable.

There was relief in Brannigan, now that he knew the reason for Kate's flight. And yet it was a sour relief. With Lou Jennifer alive, Kate Belan was beyond his, Brannigan's reach. And too, with Jennifer alive, Sam Brannigan had not even his freedom. *There are men, Brannigan told himself, who would have taken a gun and settled this thing with Jennifer, one way or another. That was the way I should have fought him.* Now it was too late.

Gripping the iron bars of the cell door, Brannigan heaved his great weight against it. It was a foolish gesture, a futile thing. No matter how great a man's strength, there was no breaking down prison bars.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Torches for Epitaph Town

THERE was finally a great commotion along Epitaph's street. It was an uproar of men's voices, a tumult and a shouting. Brannigan's cell window looked out upon the blank wall of a warehouse, but above the neighboring building the sky was turning first an eerie pink and then a ruddy red. Men were shouting: "Fire!" It seemed to the imprisoned man that all of Epitaph joined in the wild yelling.

Jock Langley came, moving with more speed than was his custom. He said, unlocking the cell door, "Brannigan, I'm taking you to Carson City for safekeeping."

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This town has gone loco. Cal Purcell and his crew are burning the wagon yard of your freighting company, and they're going after your stage company office next. Half the town is joining just for the hell of it."

"Jock, let me talk to the crowd," Brannigan said. "I can't reason with Purcell and his crew, but the townsmen are my friends."

"Friends, hell!" Langley growled. "They're a band of drunken sheep, believing what they're told—that you murdered those two men at Shamrock Slope."

There was no arguing with old Jock Langley. He steered Brannigan to the rear of the building, unlocked a narrow door, and they stepped out into the night. The whole sky seemed painted red with the glow of the burning wagon yard. Brannigan could hear the rumble of excited voices in the distance as he followed Langley along the grubby rear of Epitaph town. They reached Silver Knob, and Langley had a livery stable rig waiting there. They climbed in and the lawman, taking up the reins, turned the horse down the hill.

"You'll be safe in Carson," Langley said. "And when you come up for trial, I'm betting you'll be turned free. Me, I'm convinced now that you been framed. And that Lou Jennifer is doing the framing. He's after your hide and after the Brannigan mining interests—and maybe he wants back Kate Belan. Sure; maybe I should stay and buck that crowd. But what good would it do? I'd be gun-whipped, sure, and that mob would keep right on. This way, I can side you when you are free and can nail Jennifer's hide to the fence."

The horse was moving at a steady trot, now was crossing Silver Knob Bridge. Brannigan looked back and saw the bright center of the fire, with the flames shooting high as they were fanned by the wind. He thought in alarm, *Those fools'll burn down the whole town!* And more than ever before, reborn Epitaph seemed to be his—Brannigan's—town.

He turned to face Jock Langley, his mind made up, and he said savagely, "Jock, I'm going back." He reached out before the lawman could divine his purpose, and pulled the sixgun from Langley's holster. "Lou Jennifer has gone too far," he muttered. "I'm going to stop him, or die trying. Stop this rig, Jock!"

HE JUMPED from the buggy before it halted. He turned back toward Epitaph, ignoring Langley's protests, and he moved upgrade at a lurching run. He was a big man, and at forty-five he no longer was young; halfway up Silver Knob, he became winded and dropped into a walk. He was still climbing when the stage from Carson City overtook him. The heavy Concord was taking the grade at an easy gait, and its driver, Si Ankers, yelled through the darkness, "Hi, Brannigan, that you? What's going on up in town?"

And another voice, the sweetest voice in the world to Sam Brannigan, called from inside the coach, "Sam! Sam, wait!"

Si Ankers pulled up and braked his coach, and Kate Belan descended. She was pale and her luminous blue eyes were deep shadowed.

"Sam, word of your being arrested spread all over Carson," Kate said. Her voice was husky with alarm. "It came by telegraph, and I heard it almost at once. I came back, Sam, because I know who killed Dutch Lamber and Ben Rudd. It was the man I married, the man I believed dead. Luke Jarrett!"

"Kate, you know?"

"I learned what he was a month after I married him," Kate said. "He was mixed up with a wild bunch that preyed on prospectors that made strikes. I heard him and one of his partners quarreling over the loot they stole from the mine at Shamrock Slope. It was then that I parted from him." "You thought all these years that he was dead?"

Kate Belan nodded heavily. "We were living in Virginia City at the time. He went away, for he was afraid I would go to the law. Later, I heard that he had been killed in a gunfight in Arizona. I know now that I made a mistake in keeping quiet."

Brannigan said, "It's a mistake I can make right. Kate, you've got to keep away from Epitaph tonight." He saw that she would protest being sent away, so he turned to Si Ankers. "Si, take Kate and your other passengers back to Carson." He considered a moment, then added, "Exchange hat and coat with me, partner."

He removed the hat and coat which was to have been a part of his wedding attire, and replaced them with Si Ankers' battered sombrero and worn coat.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sam Brannigan—Fighting Man!

ONCE, Sam Brannigan had witnessed the burning of Virginia City. The town of Epitaph now was swept by the same sort of holocaust. It was a patchwork of wood and canvas, and once ignited it burned like tinder. There was a wind blowing across the flat, and it swept the flames from the wagon yard and the stage company office to the adjoining buildings. Both sides of the main street were engulfed, and the night was eerily alight. The flames roared and crackled, and roofs collapsed and walls caved in with explosive roars. Men were shouting and women were screaming, and the middle of the street was thronged with milling people. There no longer was any hell-raising mob of townsmen, for every man and woman and child in Epitaph had turned to the grim task of saving lives and belongings. The railroad toughs—Cal Purcell's crew—were breaking into the marshal's office and lock-up, seeking a bird that already had flown.

Sam Brannigan saw all this with eyes filmed with rage. With his flabby hat pulled low and the collar of his seedy coat turned up, he was partially disguised. But he moved unrecognized through the crowd because the townspeople had thought only of themselves in this time of disaster. He moved along blazing Blue Chip Row and saw ahead of him the deadfall-owner, Ace Lemoyne, who was fleeing with a tin cash box hugged to his chest. Brannigan overtook the man, and collared him.

"Where's Jennifer, damn you! Where's Lou Jennifer?"

"He's gone, Brannigan," Lemoyne said, frantic in his attempts to break away. "He and Purcell. They're pulling out by train. Let loose of me—"

Brannigan released him, then turned and fought his way through the half-crazed crowd. A false-front fell with a roaring crash, and for a long moment a rain of sparks showered down. Men and women cried out as their flesh was burnt and their clothes caught fire, and here and there children were bawling. A team of bays



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stampeded, and a man was run down. Sooty black smoke was everywhere like a fog. Breaking clear of the throng, Brannigan struck out at a run for the railroad depot. There was a rubble-filled field to cross, and he saw that Cal Purcell's special train of four box cars and a single passenger coach was about to pull out. He reached the depot platform on stumbling legs, and, none too soon, heaved himself up onto the coach's rear platform.

The funnel-stacked engine was gaining speed, and the coach was lurching wildly on the Sierra-Pacific's uncertain roadbed. Rumbling over Silver Knob Bridge, the train fled northward away from dying Epitaph. Brannigan's chest heaved as he gasped for breath. He moved to the open door and stepped into the lamplighted coach.

Lou Jennifer and Cal Purcell were facing one another in the aisle between the seats, and the air rang with the angry recriminations they hurled at each other. From what Brannigan paused to hear, each man was blaming the other for having let the wagon yard blaze and the stage company fire get out of hand. Purcell's back was to the doorway, and Brannigan, taking him from behind, wrapped his left arm around the man's neck.

Purcell cursed and reached down for his holstered gun, but Brannigan's right hand reached the weapon first. He drew it clear and levelled it at Lou Jennifer, while still holding Purcell, and he said, "Jennifer, I once said I'd put a rope around your neck—"

Jennifer already had drawn a pocket gun, and he fired one wild shot and then turned to run. The derringer's slug tore into Purcell's helpless person, and the man sagged limply in Brannigan's arm. Releasing Purcell, letting him collapse to the floor, Brannigan ran forward through the coach. He had a chance to shoot Jennifer, as the man ran through the doorway ahead, but the thought was in Brannigan's mind to take Lou Jennifer alive—to see him hang.

He plunged through the doorway, and Jennifer was clinging to the handrail while trying to make up nerve enough to jump. Brannigan grabbed at him, and Jennifer's derringer blasted almost in his face. Brannigan clubbed down with his sixgun, knock-

ing the pocket gun from Jennifer's hand. Jennifer howled with pain and rage, then grappled. They strained against each other, two giant men equally matched in strength. Then Jennifer broke free and drove his bent knee hard into Brannigan's groin. Brannigan groaned with pain, but he managed to grab Jennifer's upraised knee. He flung Jennifer backward—too hard, for the man toppled over the handrail and dropped, screaming, down between the coach and the boxcar ahead. There was a grinding sound beneath the wheels, and Sam Brannigan shuddered.

An interval passed in which the speeding train must have traveled more than a mile. Then Sam Brannigan dropped off and trudged back toward blazing Epitaph, alone. . . .

THE new sun lifted and here and there a trace of smoke curled lazily from the charred rubble that had been Epitaph town. The townspeople began to drift back, to poke dazedly in the ruins of their homes and business places. A big soot-smudged man with tired eyes greeted the returning people with a few words of encouragement. "We'll live," he said.

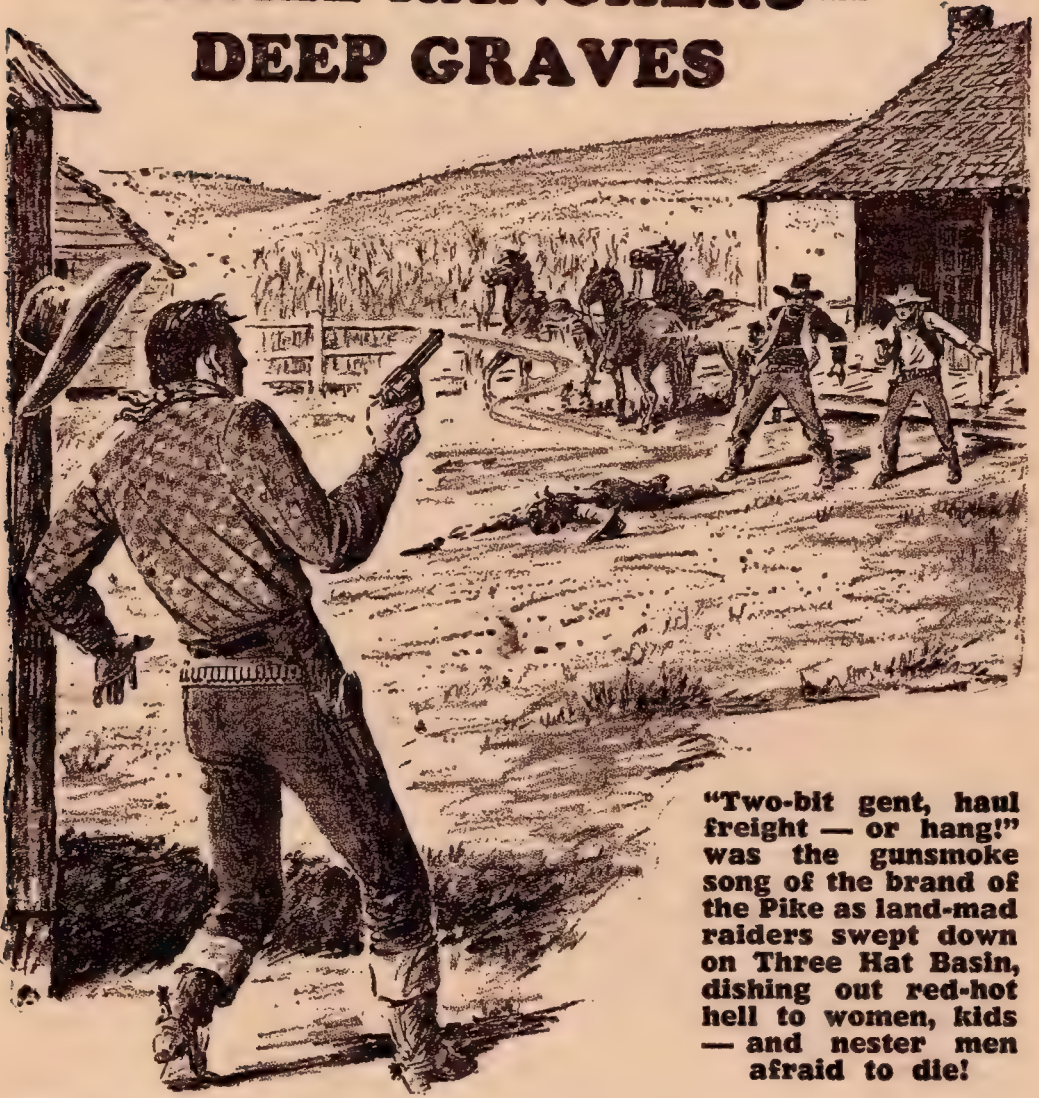
The people listened and believed, for this fire-marked man was Big Sam Brannigan, he of the Midas touch and the fabulous luck. He pointed no accusing fingers, now that the railroad toughs were gone. Instead, he handed out gold coins here and yellow-backed bills there. His office building had been gutted, but he had salvaged and opened his safe.

A woman came picking her way through the litter of the street. She faced Sam Brannigan with a smile, and when Kate Belan smiled the world seemed right. She said, "I didn't go back to Carson, Sam." Her smile wavered. "Sam, our town is gone."

"We'll build it again," said Brannigan, putting his arms about her. "Epitaph has had two lives; it will have a third. We'll build it bigger and better, Kate. . . ." He talked on and on, and, as some men said, Big Sam Brannigan was a big talker. But Kate Belan hung on his every word, and it might have been that she saw a touch of genius in this big man who possessed the touch of Midas. Or perhaps she merely believed in the Brannigan luck.

THE END

SMALL RANCHERS... DEEP GRAVES



"Two-bit gent, haul freight — or hang!" was the gunsmoke song of the brand of the Pike as land-mad raiders swept down on Three Hat Basin, dishing out red-hot hell to women, kids — and nester men afraid to die!

Pete's shot was echoed by a twin blast.

IT WAS hot on the rim, and Pete Chenoweth wiped sweat from his brow as he watched the man creeping up the long defile below the hideout canyon. Pete slid his carbine into position, ready to center on the man when he emerged into the small opening just below. If he emerged. The man was coming with stealth, and in all probability was one of the Pike outfit, accompanied by others still out of sight.

A grim, weather-burnt man in his late twenties, Pete Chenoweth, small-time

By
Giff Cheshire

rancher, was in the toughest going of his life.

Returning to Greysville two afternoons before, after selling a small herd in Denver, he had found that Spade Leek and his Pike gang had moved into Pete's little Bar-C-Bar spread, there below in Three Hat Basin. And Spade was not satisfied with

that: he wanted the life of the only two-bitter who had had the guts to resist him.

As Pete had turned up the road leading to his range, he saw Spade Leek, surrounded by a dozen gun-hands, lolling on the tiny veranda. Blind rage filled him. Instantly, his carbine was pumping and three men were writhing on the boards. A withering hail of lead then came his way, and only the speed of his horse had enabled him to escape to the hideout where he now had lurked for two hunted days and nights.

A wave of bitterness swept over him. He hadn't a chance in the world, trying to buck Spade Leek and his crew alone. Alone—without a friend to help him!

Six months before, things had been rolling along as well as any shoestring cowman could reasonably expect. Then, out of a clear sky, the Pike outfit, largest in the county, had changed hands. Spade Leek, a dour tough, had bought the spread, and it soon became evident that he stood ready to smash any resistance to his greed to increase his holdings.

Some few of the small ranchers of Three Hat Basin had attempted to stand up to him as, backed by corrupted authority, he coldly went about his plan for taking over the entire basin through gun-muzzle purchase—and those courageous small ranchers had gone quickly down in a series of uninvestigated murders.

The remaining nesters, excepting Pete Chenoweth, had been cowed completely. When he quietly tried to organize resistance, he was called a fool by his fellow nesters who, one by one, gave in to the Pike.

Pete contemptuously withdrew from the other basin nesters. The hell with them! His own range was remote from the latest extensions of the Pike, and perhaps his turn wouldn't come for many months . . . even years. And when it did—well, Leek and his gunslicks would find they had a fight on their hands!

But now, with terrible suddenness, his turn *had* come! And what was his brave, last fight getting him? Holed up like a hunted animal for what? He would die hopelessly, gaining nothing but an unmarked, forgotten grave. A wonderful end to a ten-year struggle to establish himself as an independent and useful factor in the general scheme of things.

"Damn it, it ain't worth it!" he told himself savagely. "I'm a fool to stay here and let them finish me! I tried to be decent and honest and useful! The hell with it! If I have to gun to stay alive, I might as well gun for a living, too! That looks like the only way to beat the game!"

AND he meant it. Deep within him, revolt at his fate had been stirring for many hours. What was to prevent him from slipping away, later to take what he wanted from the world as ruthlessly and violently as did Spade Leek?

As these sentiments surged in Pete's mind, his eyes had not for an instant left the figure of the stealthily approaching man. And now he noted something strangely familiar about him. Yet . . . "Damned if I ever saw *that* jigger riding with the Pike," he grunted to himself. But there sure as hell was something familiar about him. Still, it couldn't be a friend. There was certainly no friend to help him in *these* parts, he reminded himself bitterly.

The man coming up toward him showed himself for a few seconds in the opening below, then pressed back into cover. This time Pete recognized him in instant bewilderment. It was Charley Northrup, one of the few still unmolested nesters from the other end of the basin. Pete had only a scant acquaintance with the man. If Northrup was seeking him, as he seemed to be, Pete could not fathom the reason.

He held the carbine in readiness, just in case it was some Pike trick. Northrup had not spotted him, and was within range when Pete called:

"Stand, Northrup! What're you doing up here?"

The man jerked erect, stopping dead in his tracks. "That you, Pete Chenoweth?" he bawled. "Listen, I gotta talk to you!"

After a moment's reflection, Pete shouted back, "Come ahead, but I'm keeping a gun on you! If you're rigging something, Northrup, you'll get a hole dead center of your forehead!"

Northrup wore a side gun, but it was still holstered. Pete remembered the middle-aged man as being mild and meek and self-effacing. Yet now there seemed a curious courage in him as he came forward. At Pete's terse command, he stopped twenty paces away.

"Pete," he said calmly, "if you'll only trust me, I can help you!"

"How?"

"I can hide you down to my place. Spade Leek knows you're here. There was talk in town last night about you being holed up in the Sweetriver canyons. I heard it and took a chance on finding you. Leek's fixing to smoke you out. He's on his way."

Pete was staring in astonishment. There was every evidence of sincerity about the man, and Pete was compelled to believe his offer was genuine.

"You get mixed up in this, Northrup, and it'll mean your hide, too!" Pete growled.

"Mebbe," Northrup admitted. "But there's a good chance, if we can sneak you to my place, that nobody'll ever come near!"

"You've got a wife and family!" Chenoweth said slowly. "Why in blazes should you take the chance?"

The lean, cleanly-clad nester smiled. "Mebbe you've forgot, Pete, but I haven't. About a year ago you whupped a Pike skunk for getting smart with my girl Sally, one day in Greysville. You sided me against the Pike, and now it's my turn. I aim to side you."

Pete lowered the carbine, but the scowl did not leave his face. "A little thing like that don't obligate you to expose your whole family to maybe murder, Charley!"

Charley Northrup bit off a quid of chewing tobacco and munched it thoughtfully. "You can't put no fixed value on gratitude, Pete," he said slowly. "You help me and I help you, no matter what. That's the only way you can rightly figure a thing like that!"

The shock of this totally unexpected offer

of friendship and help from a nester had not left Pete. "You high-tail it outta here before the Pike bunch catches you around here!" he snapped. "Don't worry about me! I'm getting out! To hell with your things a man can't fix a value on, Northrup! Maybe you're fool enough to die for 'em, but I'm not!"

The other smiled wanly. "You got a right to feel that way, Pete, after what they've put you through. Only maybe I don't mean to let you keep on feeling that way. Anyhow, if you want to clear out, you'll have to lie low somewheres a heap safer'n this for a spell! Come on, we're heading for my place! No use your arguing I should go alone. I seen the Pike bunch not very far behind me, and if they spot me now, they'll know I been trying to help you. I'll have a better chance of getting through if you'll come with me."

Pete saw he had no answer for this. And as for danger to his new-found friend, Charley Northrup would have involved himself enough on Pete's behalf to reap the full measure of Pike's revenge, should he be caught in these parts on a mission of help for Pike's enemy. He was right about having a better chance of getting out if Pete went with him, for Pete knew the locality like the back of his hand.

"Where's your horse?" Pete asked.

"Hid him down on the Sweetriver. Couple of miles, maybe. You ready?"

Pete got his horse and took Northrup by a devious route to the south bank of the Sweetriver, then they cut down-stream cautiously to the place where Northrup had hobbled his horse in a box alder thicket. In the first lap they had barely dodged a pair of Pike riders; getting Northrup on

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to his little dry-dirt farm down on the far end of the basin was going to be an even more ticklish business.

AS THEY forded the river and cut south, Pete had just about decided to throw up the fight and, as soon as things had calmed down a little, clear out of the basin, to build himself a new life—with gun tactics! They seemed better suited to human accomplishment! His bitterness hardened within him as he rode on silently. He had wasted a lot of years trying to keep on the decent side of the fence. He would find a new range and make up for it in the hard, swift, efficient way Spade Leek used.

They worked out of the dangerous Sweet-river section, and hid in the Lightning Strike Hole until nightfall made it safer for them to come out into the open basin. Riding swiftly thereafter, they came to the South Point nester colony just short of midnight and made their way without incident to Charley Northrup's poverty acres.

Though the blinds had been drawn, there was light in the house, with Northrup's wife and daughter waiting anxiously. Jenny Northrup was a plump, worn woman, with the typical stolid realism of a ranch wife. She nodded a casual welcome to Pete and said, "Reckon you're hungry, and we're keeping it warm for you," and began to take a long-prepared meal out of the warming oven.

Her daughter helped her. A quiet, pretty girl, Sally Northrup flashed Pete a smile of welcome. Though he had almost forgotten it, he now recalled vividly the incident when he had whipped the Pike rider, that day in Greysville, for a disrespectful remark. It surprised him that while it had meant so little to him, it had meant so much to her father and perhaps to the girl.

When they had eaten, Pete said gruffly, "Northrup, I shouldn't be doing this! Maybe you could keep me hid here a while, but maybe not. If the Pike found out where I was, you wouldn't have a building left on your place. You'd take lead in your innards. Maybe your women would, too."

Northrup smiled, filling his pipe. "Spade Leek's got everything except sense. They'd never think to look for you here unless a Pike man happened to spot me in the Sweet-river region this afternoon. And if they do think of it, they won't find you. Come."

The nester took Pete into the bedroom that opened off the kitchen and turned to the clothes closet built in one corner. He was carrying a lamp, and when he opened the closet door he pointed to the ceiling. "That looks all of a piece, don't it?" he asked. "Seem likely to you a man could get through that ceiling?"

As Pete shook his head, Northrup climbed on top a trunk on the closet floor and pushed on the ceiling. The whole thing swung up on hinges. "No trap door to give you away. I built it as a place to hide our valuables. You can sleep in this room. Some of us'll be watching, and we'll give you the signal should you need to climb up here. I bored a couple of holes up there so's you kin watch the yard."

"Thanks, Charley!" Pete stammered. "But you can't keep me here forever!"

"Won't be forever, son. Maybe only a day or so. The idee is only to keep you out of sight and harm's way till we have a chance to get the jump on the Pike."

Pete stared at him. "You mean you want us to jump the Pike?" he exclaimed.

Northrup nodded calmly. "It's got to be done. We can't clean the Pike, son, but it won't be necessary. Spade Leek's the dangerous one, with maybe one or two who're close to him. Get shed of them, and that pack of gunslingers'd shake apart in a week."

The man was too much of a puzzle for the now exhausted Pete Chenoweth. He only said, "I had you pegged for a peaceable man, Charley. Getting rid of Spade Leek'll take a killing!"

"I know it. Peace don't come from letting yourself be run over all the time. It don't come from shutting your eyes to the facts. What Spade Leek and the Pike've done up to now won't hold a candle to what they'll try if they ain't stopped. It's a decent man's bounden duty to stop 'em. Looks like the only ones in the basin with guts enough to do it is you and me."

PETE didn't feel like arguing further at this point. His fugitive days and nights in the hills had robbed him of rest, and he was bone weary. He shucked clothes presently and fell into bed, feeling curiously secure in the protection of this strange, staunch Northrup family. When he opened his eyes again, daylight filled the room.

Though they were trying to be quiet, he could tell that the women were stirring in the kitchen, and the aromas of breakfast cooking came to him. He dressed and went out.

Only Sally had been in the kitchen, he discovered, and she explained that her parents were choring in the barn down below the house. Rested, he found his eyes trailing her, and he was surprised he had not noticed how attractive and desirable she was that other time.

"I didn't know there was folks like you on this earth," he said. "It's mighty fine of you—"

"Shush!" she returned. "We're glad to do what we can, Pete!" Then she smiled, as a woman does who has taken a man under her management. "Go wash up. The folks'll be back for breakfast in a minute."

Pete was just drying his hands when he saw Charley Northrup hurrying across the barnyard below the house. Northrup made a waving motion with his arm, and, reacting to it, Pete stepped hastily within doors. Northrup hurried across the dooryard, his face grave, came in and shut the door.

"Take the extra plate off the table, Sally," he said quickly. "Pete, you'll have to climb into your roost! Leek and a couple of Pike riders're coming across the flat!"

Pete looked at him for a long moment. Then, "Get my horse, Charley," he said firmly. "I'm clearing out now! I won't stay and get you shot up on account of me!"

"There ain't time!" Northrup returned, and he seemed glad of it. "Do what I say."

Pete stared at him. Then he whirled into the bedroom, seized his gunbelt, straightened his bed, then swung up through the false ceiling of the closet. He had barely dropped it back into place when pounding hoofbeats sounded through the walls.

The Northrup house was a story-and-a-half affair, and this section was over the bedroom lean-to, walled off from the main attic which was gained through another opening. Pete knew that he was safe here, and rays of daylight instantly located the peep holes Northrup had cut for him. He bellied down and crawled under the low, sharply angling rafters, and took a sight into the yard.

Charley Northrup had hastened out into



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the yard, and the three Pike men had dismounted menacingly. Spade Leek was glaring at Northrup, his gaunt body and sharp, spade-bearded face taut with threat. The others were Whitey Peters, his segundo, and Buff Freyland, a ragtale gunnie.

"No use your denying you went into the Sweetriver hills yesterday, Northrup!" Leek was fuming. "No use denying you went there to help him! He ain't in the hills now! We beat 'em from one end to another without sighting hide nor hair of him!"

Pete cursed softly as he heard Northrup reply calmly. "I'm not denying a thing! Pete Chenoweth's a friend of mine. I'll sure give him all the help I can!"

It had been too much to hope that Northrup had got into those closely watched hills and out again without being seen! And Pete's horse carried the Bar-C-Bar brand and was still in the barn, though Northrup had planned to hide it in the hills to the south, had the Pike not showed up so unexpectedly soon.

A queer, desperate feeling was in Pete Chenoweth as he watched the ugly heavily-armed trio below. It would be fairly simple for him to cut one or more of them down from his vantage point, but such an eruption would cost Charley Northrup's life. Yet that was not all that stayed Pete. After the days and nights in the hills, he wanted only to get away to a new start, and the devil with the whole valley known as Three Hat Basin!

They would search the place, combing it inch-by-inch once they found the Bar-C-Bar horse. Maybe they wouldn't find his hideout, but the one chance to save Charley and at the same time make a getaway was to get onto that horse and slip off unobserved at once. He lifted the false ceiling and dropped down silently into the closet. He crept through the bedroom and out into the kitchen, gun in hand. He saw instantly that he could cut to the left of the woodshed, swing down through a stand of sweet corn in the garden to the barn without them seeing him. This thing would be easy as rolling off a log.

Sally and her mother had been out of sight from Pete's attic peep-hole, but now he saw that they had gone out into the yard. Nothing stood in his way. He could get his horse and be gone, saving all the North-

rup from harm. And, incidentally, his own very precious hide.

He cat-footed it across the porch and cut around the corner of the woodshed, relief going through him at the ease with which he had accomplished it. Gaining the long rows of corn, higher than a man's head, he bent and sped toward the barn. He saw he was going to be able to carry out the rest of the plan with comparative ease. It wouldn't be long now.

Then sharp, angry words reached his ears: "Damn you, Spade Leek! Keep your filthy hands off my girl! Keep them to hell off, I say!"

Pete froze in his tracks. He had not thought of an obvious thing, that Leek would waste no time in tedious search when, in the women, he had a powerful instrument of persuasion to apply to Charley Northrup's tongue. And Leek was just the right type for a chore like that.

PETE spun on his heel, powered by a sudden overbearing fury in his own heart. He beat across the barnyard, wanting by his openly-advertised presence to force a change of tactics on them. Those chips were down now.

They did not see him until he beat around the corner of the milk house, gun in hand. Sally's hair was rumped from a struggle with Leek, but the pug-ugly had let her go and whirled toward the distraction. He had a nasty expression on his face.

"Get in the house!" Pete yelled, and the two women were wise enough to obey him hastily.

Charley Northrup had flung himself aside, puzzled and astonished by Pete's unexpected emergence from this direction, yet quick-witted enough to lend fast and intelligent support. He spun and dove through the door of the woodshed.

All three Pike men had fallen into quick, instinctive gun stances, their hands stabbing toward their sixes. Abruptly Pete Chenoweth discovered that every last trace of his bitter spirit of defeat was gone. This, he knew now, was the thing he really wanted, had wanted all his short life. He felt happy to see it through.

He stabbed a shot toward Spade Leek, and the big man jerked but did not go down.

It was a swirl of fast, unsheltered action

after that. Pete's next shot was aimed at Buff Freyland, and it was good. Yet it was echoed by a twin blast from the other Pike pair, and pain and shock tore into Pete's left shoulder. He knew he could not survive, but he was going to take Leek with him. He fired again, knowing he would get back two for one.

As he fought against the blackness that was rapidly enveloping the world, he saw with amazement both Pike men crumple to the ground. He didn't know how that had happened, but it had. There was a curious buzzing in Pete's head.

Charley Northrup stepped out the wood shed door, carrying a smoking scatter gun as Pete Chenoweth pitched forward on his face. . .

By evening he was up and around again, his shattered shoulder tended by the doctor Charley Northrup had hastily summoned from town, his spirits higher than they had been for months.

The supper table, in a western ranch home, was the high spot in the day, with work accomplished, with rest ahead and, between, a few leisure hours. Supper finished, the Northrup family sat around the table, Charley smoking his pipe, and Pete Chenoweth occupied by strange thoughts. It was a queer thing to remember that only the day before he had been trapped hopelessly, counting himself without a friend in the world. Yet, to pay an

almost forgotten debt of gratitude, a powerful friend had suddenly emerged. Pete felt impelled to speak his mind about this again. In fact he felt like talking a hell of a lot.

"I still don't understand it, Charley! What you done for me is all out of proportion to what I done for you! Yet you all were so willing, even anxious to do it! I don't get it."

Charley Northrup chuckled. "Ma, there, hefts a good fifty pounds more'n Sally. Yet do you suppose I could figure I love her just that much more'n Sally?" He laughed outright.

Pete grinned. He was beginning to understand, to feel that way himself about things. Within a decent human heart there were many values of equal worth. Charley and his family had not thought to pay their debt by the pound; they had returned fellowship for fellowship. A man couldn't ask for more than that. Sometimes a man couldn't ask for that.

It seemed a far better world to Pete Chenoweth than he had ever suspected it of being. He smiled at Sally—and she smiled back, a smile filled with the promise of a new peace and happiness. It was great to be alive. He hadn't missed when he'd bet on old Charley. But it had taken guns and blood and death to win what was the heritage of this western country. Yes, Pete Chenoweth was happy.

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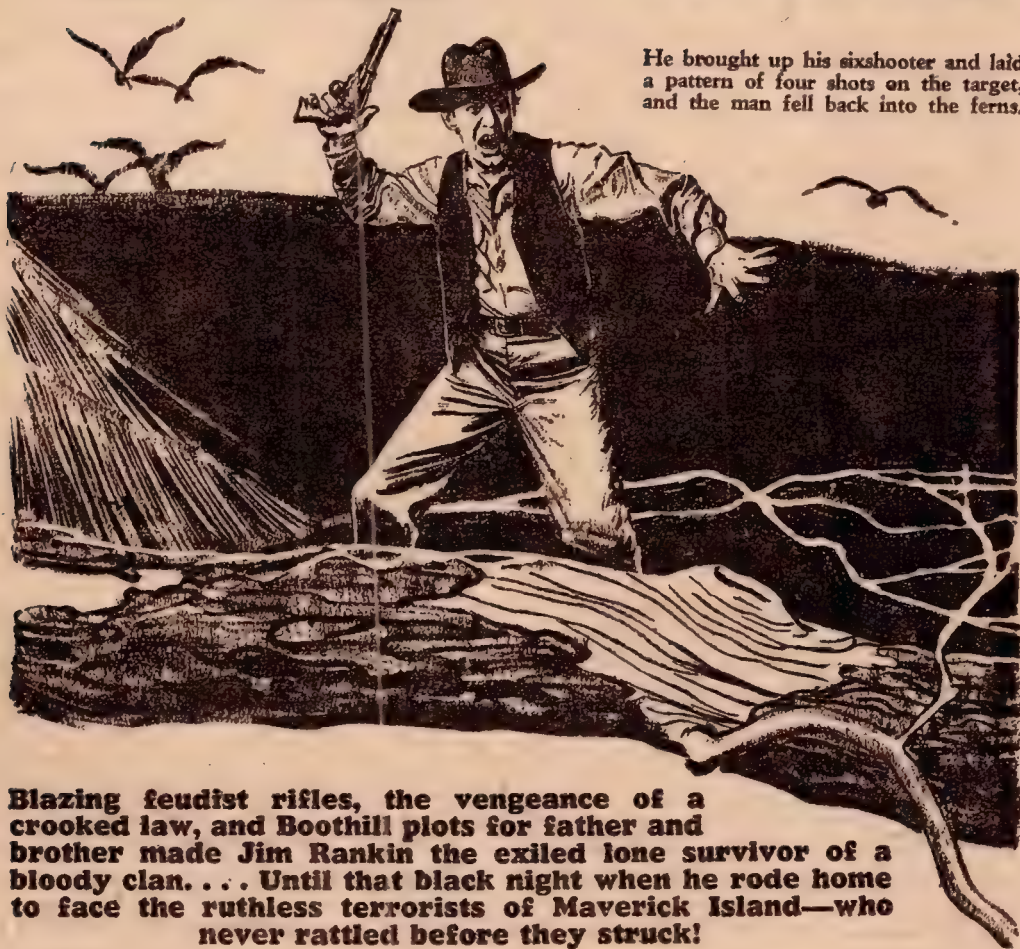
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Feudists

He brought up his sixshooter and laid a pattern of four shots on the target, and the man fell back into the ferns.



Blazing feudist rifles, the vengeance of a crooked law, and Boothill plots for father and brother made Jim Rankin the exiled lone survivor of a bloody clan. . . . Until that black night when he rode home to face the ruthless terrorists of Maverick Island—who never rattled before they struck!

CHAPTER ONE

Night Riders of Maverick Island

IT WAS low tide when Jim Rankin crossed the three-mile wide *laguna* between the mainland and Maverick Island, straddling a mouse-colored little mustang that splashed through the shallow water without getting the saddle skirts wet. The night was black and a strong sea wind whipped breakers against the Gulf side of the island that boomed, in echo, like cannon here among the coastal inlets.

This was the first time Jim Rankin had set foot on his island home in three years, and his heart hammered a little faster as he put the pony to a lope up Soledad Trace.

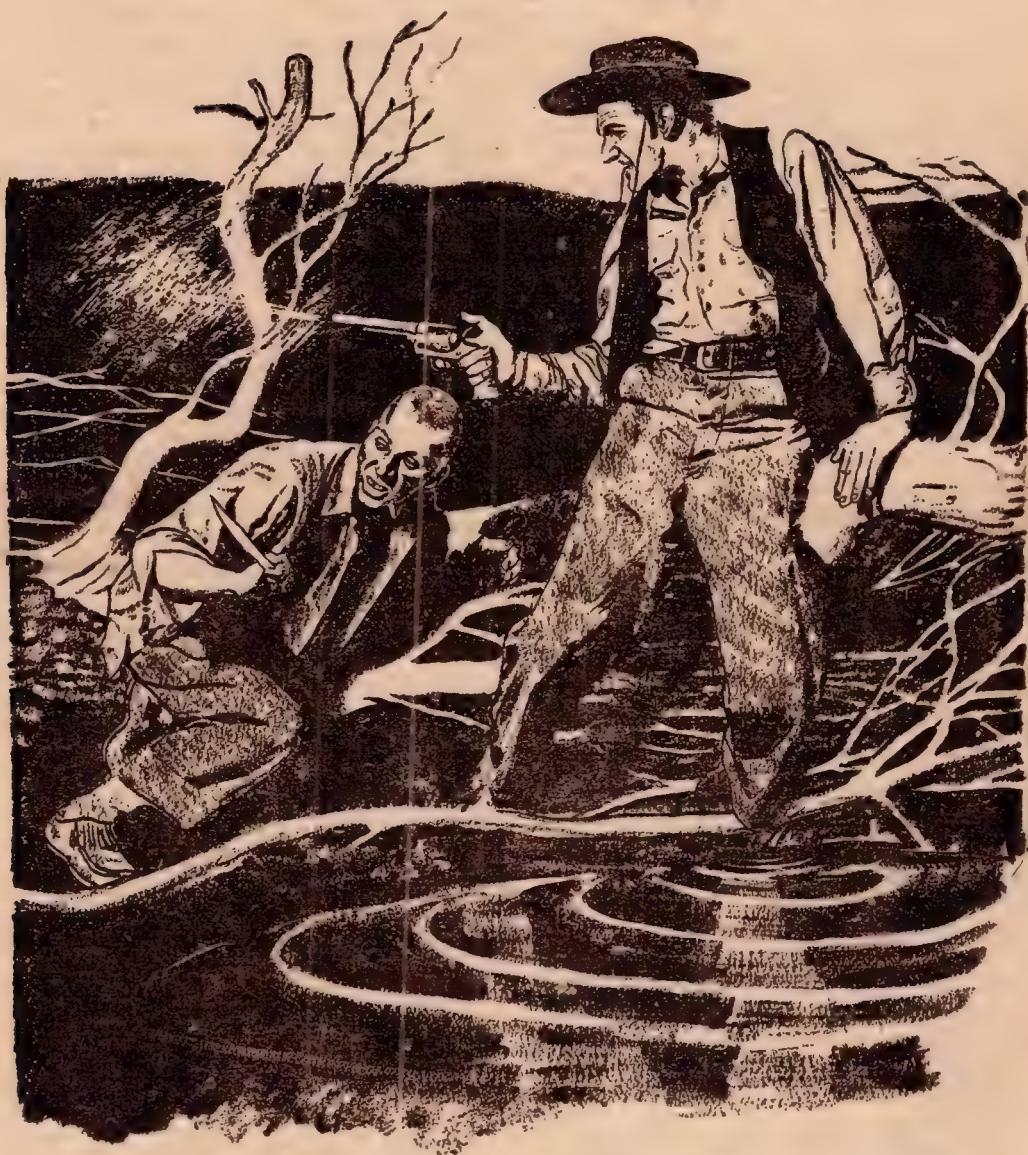
He had left here running from the guns of the Sublett clan, and the vengeance of a crooked law, with a Minnie ball in his side and the horror of seeing his father and brother shot down before his eyes sick and fresh in his mind.

Jim Rankin had nearly died in the fever-ridden swamps and bayous near Matagorda Bay before an old trapper found him and took him in. The road to recovery had been long and painful. It had been a year before he could walk, two years before he could sit a saddle with anything like his old lithe skill. Only hate had kept him alive—hate and a burning desire for vengeance that was like a well-forged fire inside him.

In the interim a new sheriff had taken

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office in Indianola, a man not controlled by clan politics. The old charges had been dropped. The new peace officer had publicly declared that he wasn't siding either family in the bitter fight that had already taken a score of lives.

So it was safe for Jim Rankin to return.

Safe, that is, as far as the law was concerned. But old feuds and antagonisms that had lain dormant these many years would awaken with his coming. He was riding into trouble, and knew it.

Jim Rankin wasn't thinking about the Rankin-Sublett feud, however, as he moved

along the familiar road that was little more than a cow trail through the tangled prickly pear and mesquite. He was envisioning the warmth of Mammy Tucker's welcoming smile and the grip of old Dan's black, brush-scabbed hand.

The Tuckers were a Negro family that had lived on the place from the time the Rankins first came to the island. Jim considered them his folks. All the way from the mainland he had been thinking about how good it would be to hear old Dan's deep-chested roar of welcome and see the way Mammy's black face would light up like a lamp when she saw him.

Then he thought of Ben Milam Tucker, the old couple's only son, and a smile tugged at the corners of his lips. He wondered if Ben could still tail a brush-wild bull on foot, and if the kinky-headed little cuss had ever put any weight on his skinny frame. Ben would be twenty now, he recalled, and probably as big as old Dan.

Well, he'd have the answer to all of that soon enough. Here was the old drop-pole gate that led into the Rankin horse trap, and yonder in the thick shadows was the brush-thatched ranchhouse where he'd spent eighteen years of his life. He felt like sounding off with a rebel yell.

Then the moon showed through a rift in the clouds and Jim saw how dark and deserted the house looked. A little chill rode up his spine. The horse trap was empty and the corrals looked rundown. Nobody hollered at him from the house and there wasn't a sound to be heard except his own ruffled breathing and the dull boom of breakers.

Riding closer, Jim saw the way the brush roof tumbled in and the front door yawned wide on sagging leather hinges. The place was deserted, he realized. Nobody had lived here in months. Jim broke out in a cold sweat and panic clawed up inside him at the thought.

The night seemed suddenly full of menace and sound, and Jim was remembering the time Ollie Jacks and his crew of cut-throat renegades had thrown in with the Subletts to wipe out the island clan. Jim's father and brother had died that night, and he had been badly wounded, but neither old Dan Tucker nor his wife and son had been molested. The clans didn't make war that way.

Then where were the Tuckers? What had happened during the three years he had been away? It wasn't like old Dan to ride off and leave the place. The old Negro cowman had been with the Rankins forty years, and he was loyal as they came.

But something was wrong, and Jim Rankin shivered a little as a coyote howled back among the sand dunes. His hand dropped to his gun. The silence and the blank, staring windows of the empty house had him spooked.

THEN a sound reached Jim Rankin's ears that made him stiffen in the saddle—the faint, faraway horn-clacking and bawling of driven cattle. The cattle were coming up the trail behind him. That didn't make sense to Jim. The Rankins had driven a herd across the shallow *laguna* every year in the past, trailing it to market in Pass Medina. But nobody brought cattle to the island. The thickets on the north end of Maverick Island were infested with wild cattle.

But the herd was coming up Soledad Trace and it occurred to the slim, lithe, yellow-haired young rider that honest people didn't move their cattle at night. The wind seemed to blow a little colder against his homespun butternut suit. He swung the pony out of the yard and faded into the night.

Jim knew that the Jacks gang had raided mule and *carreta* trains years back, and brought their loot to this island, where it was picked up by a two-master out of Matamoros. The old jetty and warehouse, rotting now, still stood on Duro Point. He wondered if cattle rustlers had taken them over.

He left his horse in a tangle of brush back among the dunes. He knew every coon trail and coyote path through the thickets, and he made little sound as he crept back to a vantage point near Soledad Trace. The night wind had stripped the clouds away from the moon and he could see the house and the corrals and the rutted trail very plainly in the flat wash of moonlight.

There were six men in the gun-hung bunch, and they were shoving the cattle hard. All were mounted on solid-colored bay or black horses, because that kind didn't show up so much in the moonlight, and Jim would have bet anything that the

brands on those horses were blotched. Horse-thief brands. The point rider was a lank, hard-bitten Texan wearing brush-scarred chaps and a leather brush jacket. He carried a saddle gun across his lap.

Jim wanted to get closer and see if this was Ollie Jacks and his renegades and outlaw kin. He watched the night-riders shove the herd through the Rankin horse trap. Two of the men stopped there near the drop-pole gate and sat their saddles, talking.

That was Jim's chance. He drew back from the thicket that had sheltered him and moved silently toward the gate.

Then his heart lurched as a big arm snaked around his neck and a hand holding a knife rose in front of his face. The point of that knife pricked the skin of his throat. There had been no sound, no warning of any kind, and surging terror shot through him as a voice spoke in his ear.

"Open yo' mouth," came the tense, harsh whisper, "and I'll slit yo' windpipe from ear to ear!"

CHAPTER TWO

All Sidewinders Don't Crawl

JIM felt as if he had been suddenly paralyzed. Wild fear churned through his brain and his whole body cringed from that knife.

"Ben," he said, very quiet. "Ben Milam Tucker!"

His nerves were knotted like the ends of dally ropes until the knife was lowered. A big hand swung him around.

"You ain't one of them no-account night-riders," said his assailant. "Who are you?"

Relief was like a cold wind blowing against the clammy sweat on Jim's face. "Ben, you old scoundrel," he said shakily. "Don't you know me?"

"Mista Jim, by golly!" exclaimed the Negro, and seized his hand. His grip was enough to make Jim wince and try to draw away.

This wasn't the Ben Milam Tucker that Jim remembered. This was a burly, barrel-chested giant with a broad black face showing the scars of the brush and an animal wildness that shocked him. Only the voice bore resemblance to the skinny Negro kid he had ridden the thickets with three years before.

Ben wore rags that barely covered his bulging muscles, and on his feet were rawhide *huarachas*. He carried a short, braided leather rope coiled over one thick shoulder, and wore the knife in a broad leather belt.

Jim felt a mounting sense of panic as he stared at Ben. This was worse than he had expected.

"Where is old Dan?" he demanded. "Why ain't he on the place?"

"He's daid," Ben said, simply.

Jim thought of all the years Dan Tucker had served his family, and he had to swallow the raw grief that crowded up in his throat. "I'm sorry, Ben," he managed. "How did it happen?"

"He was bit by a rattlesnake," said Ben Milam, and sweat started forming on his skin and his eyes held a dull agony. "Old Mammy, she's daid too. She just couldn't stand to see him go, Mista Jim. She died two weeks later."

The shock of that hit Jim Rankin like a kick in the belly. "A rattlesnake? Ben, old

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Dan had more sense'n to fool with a side-winder! I've seen him kill a dozen of 'em around the barn!"

"This was different, Mista Jim." Ben's voice burned with a gusty flame of rage that had been locked inside him for months. "Old pappy was tortured. They tied him up and let that rattlesnake strike him."

Sick horror flashed through Jim. "Who did it, Ben?" he asked hoarsely.

"It was the *jefe* of them night-riders," said Ben, and his breathing quickened and there was an undertone of fear in his voice. "Ain't nobody knows who he really is, less'n he's some kin to Ollie Jacks. Old Sam Sublett hung Ollie and his brother right after your paw and brother was killed, Mista Jim, but somebody cut Lige Jacks down and him and Ollie's kid got away."

"But Ollie and his outfit had thrown in with Sublett," Jim answered. "It was Lige Jacks who killed dad."

"I know," said Ben. "But the Subletts are mighty proud and Ollie Jacks was just a scalawag, not fit'n for white folks to associate with. Not long after that him and two-three others tortured a rancher named Kinney across the island near Bosque Bayou to make him tell where his money was hid. They killed him."

"Sublett got up a posse," Ben Milam went on, "and trapped three of the gang in the swamp near Bosque Bayou, and hung two of them from the same limb they'd hung Kinney. It was Ollie's son who cut Lige down, I reckon. Ollie was already dead. The kid swore he'd get every man in the posse."

"But why was old Dan killed?" Jim asked. "I know he never rode with a Sublett posse!"

Ben shook his head. "Queer things have been happening on this island. About three-four months back, the ranchers started finding rattlesnake sign nailed on their doors. The sign was a snake's tail buttons, with a note tellin' them to get off the island. Yank Tarbull and Bill Yancey got scared and left, and Ash Smith just up and disappeared. But old Dan held out, Mista Jim." Tears came into the Negro's eyes. "He said he was holdin' Soledad Ranch for you, and nobody was going to run him off Maverick Island. You know how set he was in his ways, and how stubborn."

"So they killed him," Ben finished.

"They tortured him, too, but I don't know why. There ain't nobody left on this island but me and an old hermit fisherman living in a shack near Cajan Cove."

Old Dan tortured, killed, because of his loyalty to Jim! Reckless grief made Jim cry: "We'll find out who did it, Ben. We'll—"

The Negro silenced him with a gesture. He had snapped his huge head around, and there was a predatory wildness in the listening attitude he held. "We're crazy to be talking like this. If them night-riders was to catch us—"

They both heard it, the sound of a dead twig cracking under a careless foot. Somewhere out in the night a man cursed softly under his breath and Jim's probing eyes caught the dull glint of light on metal. His nerves tightened as he touched Ben's arm.

"You got a gun?"

"No, Mista Jim," the Negro whispered. "Jus' this old knife and rope."

"Then head out of here," Jim said urgently. "Make for the sand dunes. I've got a horse hid out there."

BUT they had already been spotted. A shot laid its thin report on the wind and a bullet chopped a limb from a nearby tree and caromed off through the thickets. Jim jerked out his gun and went at a crouching run through the brush with Ben at his heels. He did not shoot back because they were outnumbered and Ben was unarmed. He changed course when a rider loomed ahead of him, pistol in hand.

A shot hunted after them and a horse came crashing through the brush. Then a strangled cry lifted back there to be cut off abruptly as if by the stroke of a knife. Jim spun around and saw that Ben Milam was no longer following him.

He stopped, on the edge of panic. Then he saw Ben creeping toward him. The Negro was coiling the short rope about his massive shoulders. He wiped blood from his knife on his pants leg, and his teeth flashed whitely in the night.

"I throwed a scare into 'em," he said. "They won't bother us no more tonight." He struck off toward the dunes. Jim Rankin shivered a little as he fell in behind the big Negro. He knew that Ben had roped a man off his horse back there in the brush and killed him. . . .

It was nearing midnight when they approached a slab-pine shack near Cajan Cove, long abandoned and rotting on its mesquite-log foundations. Breakers still pounded the shore and here, near the sea, wind whipped through the thickets with a solid, threshing sound. Night birds screamed around them and a wildcat caterwauled back among the dunes.

Ben whistled as they neared the shack, and a huge dog padded out of the shadows. "You remember that brindle pup I had, Mista Jim? Well, he's sure grown into a fine catch-dog. And the ugly son-of-a-gun likes you. Look at him wag that tail! That catamount can tell about a man a lot quicker'n most folks."

Jim pulled the ragged ears and stroked the scarred brindle head, and somehow Ben's words made him feel better. He knew he was among friends. He went inside and watched Ben start a fire in the mud fireplace. There was a pile of cow-hides on the dirt floor and a stack of branding irons in one corner.

"You live here, Ben?"

"Sho' do," said Ben. "Me and that catamount catch-dog." He squatted on his hunkers against the wall and stared moodily into the fire. "The ranch is plumb run-down, Mista Jim. But I been brandin' a few cows. Got about fifty head on the grass flats near Bosque Bayou."

Jim had been wondering how they were going to get money to fix up the place. "We'll trail them to market," he decided, "and bring back a boatload of supplies. We're moving to Soledad Ranch, Ben—to stay!"

"The cattle won't fetch much," said Ben. "A lot of prime beef is sellin' in Pass Medina just for the hides and tallow."

"What happens to those cattle brought over from the mainland?" Jim asked.

Ben stirred uneasily, and that undertone of fear was back in his voice. "I don't know, Mista Jim. They jus' disappears—same as Ash Smith did. The sheriff, or some of old Sam Sublett's Turkey Track riders, will probably trail over this way tomorrow. But they won't find hide nor hair of them critters, Mista Jim."

"Cattle don't just disappear in thin air," Jim objected.

"Maybe not," said Ben. "But a lot of cattle have been brought across the *laguna*

when the moon was right, and none have gone back to the mainland. It's just like they'd been swallowed up by the swamp."

"What about that old jetty at Duro Point? Maybe the night-riders are using that?"

Ben shook his head. "That two-master still stops here ever three-four months, but it don't pick up no cattle."

Jim had one more question. "Do you think the new sheriff might pick me up on charges the Subletts filed three years ago?"

"No," said Ben. "Sheriff Giles has made it plain he ain't taking sides in the feudin'. He says both clans are guilty. He says he'll see somebody hung if that old quarrel is taken up agin. He's fair, Mista Jim."

CHAPTER THREE

"Old Hate Dies Hard . . ."

JIM RANKIN spent a restless night on his saddle blanket, thinking over what Ben Milam had told him. He had returned to take up a fight abandoned three years ago, and found that in the interim old friends had suffered. The Tarbuls and Yanceys were gone, driven off the island, and Ash Smith was probably dead. But it was the torture-killing of old Dan Tucker that hit him hardest. He had liked none better than the grizzled, brush-scarred Negro cowman who had been almost a foster-father to him.

Why had old Dan been tortured? A man might be killed because he wouldn't leave his land, but even renegades like the Jacks gang didn't usually resort to torture unless there was profit in it. And Dan had owned nothing of value. Were the night-riders really a remnant of the outlaw gang that had killed his father and brother?

These questions poured through his mind as he lay staring up into darkness.

Bitterness assailed him at the thought that he had been away too long. But he had been helpless to return until now. He thought of his father, who had left him this hardscrabble homestead. His father had been an honest, God-fearing cowman who had tried to make peace with the Subletts, and failed.

In his mind's eye he could still picture Jube Rankin on the ranchhouse porch, telling him to mind his manners and always

be polite to his elders and never judge a man by the color of his skin. He knew that Jube would be mighty proud of old Dan.

And Jube Rankin had said something else that stuck in his memory: "Old hates die hard." That was the core and meaning of this grim struggle between the Rankins and the Subletts that had taken its death toll from each clan. Nothing had changed. It was a blood legacy handed down from father to son. And the last of the Rankins was back with one unsettled debt that stretched across the long years.

The old Minnie ball wound in Jim's side was aching a little when he finally fell asleep. . . .

EARLY the next morning Jim and Ben Milam started combing brush-wild cattle out of the thickets bordering on Bosque Bayou. Jim rode with his saddle gun handy; his hard blue eyes kept watch for other horsemen. There was no sign of the night-riders nor any trace of the cattle brought across the *laguna* the previous night. But once Jim thought he saw a gaunt, skulking figure in the brush.

Ben said he reckoned it was Sut LeBreau, the fisherman who had taken over an old shack near Cajan Cove. He told Jim not to worry about Sut. LeBreau, he said, was a harmless old hermit who minded his own business and made a living of sorts peddling fish and skins in Pass Medina.

"And Sut ain't got no use for the Subletts," he added. "Old Sam let his riders kick Sut around one time, trying to find out if he knowed anything about this rustling."

Ben was riding a little dun mule, and he and the brindle catch-dog would have looked good in a rodeo arena. Ben was as good a brushpopper as Jim had seen in the saddle, and the dog knew instinctively where cattle were hiding. At dusk that day they had thirty-two head held in loose herd on the flats, and at moonrise Jim pointed them toward Soledad Trace and the *laguna*.

The crossing to the mainland had to be made at low tide. At riptide a current roiled in through the narrows stronger than the best swimming steer could buck. -

And that posed a question in Jim Rankin's mind. This shallow sand spit connecting Maverick Island with the mainland

was the only place where the *laguna* could be forded. Any cattle leaving the island had to be driven this way. With Turkey Track watching the crossing, he didn't see how any of the stolen cattle could be returned to market. He wondered, then, what happened to them. What was the secret of Maverick Island?

They shoved the lead steers through the breakers and had the little bunch strung out across the *laguna* by the time the moon was an hour high. Ben brought up the drags, and the catchdog ranged both sides of the herd. He could throw a straggler or drifter back in the bunch quicker than any rider Jim had ever seen.

Dawn was rimming the island behind them as they brought the little gathering out on the beach near Pass Medina. Jim's nerves tightened a little. This was Turkey Track range. He led off down the beach toward the sprawling slaughter pens and the low rock warehouse that marked the site of the packery.

The stench of the place clogged his nostrils. The cattle started a dismal bawling as they approached it. In back of the slaughter pens, near the swampy waters of a bayou, were the open vats and great cast-iron kettles for rendering tallow. Hogs gorged on the rotting flesh of a vast hillock of carcasses that covered fully an acre of ground. Buzzards and other scavenger birds squatted on the heap.

One of the slaughter-pen hands swung open a gate, and Jim turned back to help Ben and the dog corral the cattle. Fires were already going under the tallow pots and two Mexicans were shoving beef through a chute where a Negro stood on a crossbeam with a heavy sledge. The Negro delivered the death blow to each animal and a mounted *vaquero* snagged the carcass with his rope and dragged it down a blood-slick trough to the skinners.

Ben pointed out the packery owner, Dutch Hennig, a paunchy, pig-eyed man wearing blood-blackened overalls. Hennig climbed the fence to inspect the cattle, ignoring the Maverick Island pair for the moment.

Jim had heard about the skinning outfits that were taking the place of round-up crews during the winter months. But he had never before seen a hide-and-tallow factory. The place depressed him.

Ben told him the packeries were being set up all along the Gulf Coast. He said the price of cattle had dropped until the hide and tallow was worth about as much as a steer delivered up the trail. The packeries, he added, weren't too particular about brands or ownership.

Jim turned at the sound of drumming hoofs on the plank runway crossing the bayou, and saw four riders approaching the slaughter-pens. In the lead was a girl, slim and lovely, wearing a man's hat and a leather riding skirt. She had spun-gold hair and her eyes touched Jim briefly, with, surprisingly, a flash of scornful anger.

"Lordy," he breathed. "She's pretty as a cow-slip in a cool spring! But why the black look? She seems to know me."

"She should," said Ben, almost harshly. "That's Sara Sublett, old Sam's granddaughter. Her pappy was killed in that fight at Soledad Ranch."

A chill rode up Jim's spine. The gray, grim old man riding behind the girl was Sam Sublett. With him was Webb Tate, one of his nephews, and a lean brush-popper that Jim didn't know. His hand dropped to his gun and a little needle of pain thrust at the old Minnie ball wound in his side, the way it always did when danger loomed.

THIS was the first time in three years that Jim Rankin had faced his enemies, and there was little sign to betray the hate

and anger and fear that tore through him like a knife. His face paled a little. The corners of his mouth jerked down. He sat stiff in the saddle as the four came on.

"That spur-jinglin' polecat on the prancin' bay is Cal Fremont," said Ben. "Turkey Track's ramrod. You watch that man, Mista Jim. He's plumb p'sen with a gun!" Ben sounded worried, and he kept close to Jim's off-stirrup.

Jim's eyes were on Sublett. For thirty years this gray old man had been a bitter enemy of the Rankins, hated and feared by every man who bore that name. He had lost two sons in fights with the Rankins, and numerous close kin.

Jim's chest was thudding as he faced the tall, wolf-lean old leader of the Sublett clan. From his earliest age he had lived with almost daily reminder of the brutal and cold-blooded killings perpetrated by the Subletts, and he had seen his father and brother shot down in a Sublett raid.

Tate and Fremont drew rein on either side of Sublett. Tate was a thin, sullen-eyed man, young and proud, with the edgy temper that seemed the common legacy of his clan stamped on his features. Jim marked Cal Fremont as easily the most dangerous of this trio.

Turkey Track's ramrod was a lean, handsome man of about Jim's own age, with sun-scorch'd features shaped by some strange violence that stirred wicked lights



JOIN THE MARCH OF DIMES

JANUARY 14-31

For the first time in thirteen years, the March of Dimes, annual appeal of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, is being held January 14-31 without the living presence of the man who inaugurated the fight against infantile paralysis and became its symbol: our late president, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The cause for which he fought so valiantly is bequeathed to the American public. The fight is not yet won. We must reinforce our strength and increase our effort until final victory is achieved.



in his eyes. Two heavy Navy .45s sagged in cutaway holsters at his hips, and the polished black butts carried several notches. His grin was twisted and ugly as he sized up the Maverick Island pair.

"You own them cattle?" Sublett demanded.

"I do," said Jim. "The cattle are in the Soledad iron. I'm Jim Rankin. I own it."

For some reason, he looked at the girl, and winced at the open hatred in her eyes. Webb Tate had his hand on his gun, and his pale eyes held a killing fury at the mere mention of Jim's name. A tension came over the group that rubbed Jim's nerve ends in warning.

"Webb," said Sublett, without taking his chill gaze off Jim, "keep a half-hitch on that ornery temper of yours. I don't aim to see you hung for shootin' down a polecat like this, and we ain't starting anything in front of Sara." Then he flung at Jim Rankin:

"You mean you *did* own that brand! It's registered in my name now!"

"The cattle are mine," Jim repeated flatly. "My pappy settled on Maverick Island forty years ago, and started the brand. He always said us Rankins'd live on the island until the last un' withered on the vine." He might have added that he was the last of the Rankins and back to take up the quarrel Sam Sublett had thought dead.

"You can stay on the island until you rot," Sublett snapped. "But I own the brand. I'm taking them cattle."

Ben Milam let out a gusty breath and Fremont's grin got wider and whiter and more wicked as he stared at them. Even the catch-dog sensed something in the wind. It was on its feet, hackles lifted as it growled at Webb Tate's nervous, prancing horse.

"I reckon you won't," said Jim, and there was steel in his voice. He added a quick command: "Git 'em Cat!" and spurred straight at Fremont as the dog lunged at Tate's horse.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dig One Rankin Grave

THINGS happened fast after that. Tate's horse bolted, almost unseating its rider. Cal Fremont's hand streaked down and

ripped a heavy gun up out of its holster and snapped a shot at the dog. He swung the gun up and over to bear on Jim Rankin as the dog staggered and went down under the ripping, tearing impact of a .45 slug.

It was quick, straight shooting and Jim knew a moment of sheer terror as he closed with the gunman. Then he had Fremont's wrist in an iron grip, and he grabbed the man's shirt and bull-dogged him out of the saddle.

As they fell, Jim saw old Sam Sublett dragging at a saddle gun in a scabbard under his leg. And he saw Ben Milam spur after Tate. The Negro's face was twisted into a muddy mask of rage as he lunged past the dog writhing on the ground.

Jim landed on top. He twisted Fremont's gun from his grip and slammed the long barrel across the man's jaw with a dull sound like the thud of a bullwhip on a bale of green hides. Fremont lost all interest in the fight. Jim rolled over and brought the gun to bear on Sublett, and saw out of the corner of his eye Ben Milam smash Tate from the saddle with a giant blow.

Long years of pent-up hatred and bitterness flashed through Jim's mind as he eared back the hammer, and mercy went out of him. Sublett was just yanking the rifle clear. Jim's finger was tightening on the trigger when Sara Sublett screamed.

That plea cut through him like a knife. He had a glimpse of the girl's ashen face, her terrified eyes, and the black and blinding rage passed. He remained motionless, staring at old Sam over the barrel of his sixgun, with the urge to kill slowly dying in his eyes.

Sublett dropped the gun. He did not lift his hands. He looked down at Jim without any trace of fear in his eyes, with his old face turned yellow and stiff with anger.

"You had better kill me now," he ground out. "You will regret it if you don't." He was a proud, unbending old man.

"Ride out," Jim ordered, bleakly. "Take your gun-dogs with you." He got to his feet and looked at Ben Milam, nursing the wounded dog. Ben had disarmed Tate and used him roughly, and his eyes were hate-filled as he stared up at Sublett.

"You mean you're not killing me?" Sublett demanded, and bewilderment pinched his thin features. He did not seem to understand this. He reined his horse around,

then turned back with a dragging temper on his cheeks.

"You may think you're staying on Maverick Island," he said grimly. "But I'll have the law on your heels in an hour!"

"Be sure it's not after you," Jim called, and looked again at the girl. He had had his chance at Sublett, and passed it up, and for that he could blame her. It did not make him feel any better. He knew that the old clansman would shoot him down in his tracks under like circumstances.

And he was thinking that with old Dan Tucker dead, and Sublett with a quit-claim deed to the Soledad iron, there was something almighty fishy afoot. That might explain why old Dan had been tortured and killed.

Sublett rode away, with Tate following, supporting the half-conscious Fremont in the saddle. The girl's glance came back to Jim, and he was left with the memory of her beauty and her horror at the sudden, bloody action.

Jim knew how he must look in the eyes of this white, shaken girl, and the knowledge filled him with bitterness. She was as pretty as a picture, and under other circumstances they might have smiled and liked one another. But their lives were snarled by the bloody thread of hatred and violence that stretched unbroken from the past, and they were poles apart.

Jim had known few girls in his short, hunted existence, and the memory of Sara Sublett's scorn stuck in his memory like a thorn. He turned, finally, with a sense of defeat that left him dismal and thoroughly wretched.

Ben was tearing his shirt into long, narrow strips and bandaging the bullet-rip in Catamount's side. "He ain't hurt bad, Mista Jim, but we'll have to keep the blow-flies away from the wound. Why didn't you blow old Sam loose from his backbone? Now we'll shore have to watch our step. He knows you're back, and he won't rest until he sees you six feet under the sand. You're a Rankin!"

That, in Ben's mind, explained everything.

THAT night Jim and Ben Milam moved back to the old Rankin homestead, Soledad Ranch. Jim had bought supplies which they ferried across the *laguna* on a raft,

pulling it along with catch-ropes. Ben Milam had a new .30-30 Winchester that he carried with loving hands.

And that night Jim lay awake for a long time, wondering why he hadn't killed old Sam Sublett when he had the chance.

For the past three years Jim had thought of little but that final showdown with the Subletts. He had known it was bound to come, if he ever hoped to live on Maverick Island in peace. It was a quarrel rooted back thirty years, its origin obscure but deadly nevertheless. It was a blood legacy that he could not escape—and had felt until that day that he wanted no escape.

Jim's earliest recollection of the feud had been when his father stood on the courthouse square in Indianola and emptied his pistol at Tol Sublett; old Sam's elder son. Tol Sublett had shot Jim's uncle in the back the day before.

Jube Rankin had been wounded in that fight, but when the smoke and the dust cleared away, Tol Sublett lay dead on the ground. The hot-headed clansman had forced the gunplay in which he lost his life.

But powder and lead settled nothing, and in the intervening years more men died. The troubled spread like a deadly virus that ate its way into men's hearts.

Old One-Ear Rankin and Jules Sublett shot it out, and both died. Hank and Brsada Berry, Jim's cousins, were both killed, shot down from ambush, and members of both clans rode through the brush with ready guns at all times. The feud encompassed whole families who were in no way related to either clan.

Jube had tried to make peace with Sam Sublett, but the old devil-dog of that clan stated publicly that he would never rest until he had avenged the death of his two sons. And in a final flare-up of the long, bloody struggle he had gotten the renegade Jacks gang to side him and wiped out the island family down to its last member.

Jim was that single survivor. He had returned with three years of bitterness cankering in his heart, the climax of a lifetime of hate. He had lived for revenge. And then he had let old Sam walk away unscathed from a fight when his every instinct cried out for revenge.

In the blackness of the night Jim thought of all this, and he thought of all the wom-

anly warmth and sweetness and joy that a girl like Sara Sublett could give a man. Old Jube Rankin had passed on to his son a simple, honest philosophy, and Jim admitted to himself that Sara Sublett had awakened in him strange stirrings of mercy and compassion. It was a new feeling for a young man reared to violence and bloodshed, and he was savoring its newness when he finally fell asleep. . . .

AT DAWN the following day they headed for Bosque Bayou trailing the stolen herd that the night-riders had brought from the mainland.

Maverick Island was thirty miles long and four miles wide, a narrow sand spit covered with brush and coastal grasses and roamed by coon and coyote and wild cattle. Jim had ridden over every foot of it, and he could not understand the disappearance of whole herds within its boundaries. He wanted to see for himself just what had happened to the stolen cattle.

The bayou twisted under tall trees and emptied its stagnant waters in a swampy area near Duro Point. Trailing clumps of Spanish moss, set in motion by the wind, slapped at them as they entered the first live-oak motte. Salt grass swished against Jim's *tapaderos* and somewhere a bull gator bellowed loud enough to startle his horse. The trees thickened and cut off the wind, and the hot, humid smell of the swamp was all around them. Hoofs made slobby, sucking sounds in the treacherous mud underfoot as they pressed deeper and deeper into the lush undergrowth.

"They sho' left a plain trail," said Ben, pointing to a hoof-trampled outbank where the cattle had been shoved across one of the numerous windings of the scum-covered bayou.

"This trail leads straight to that black log where we lost so many cattle," Jim answered, frowning. "There's no way out of the swamp from there. All that area is quagmire, and bottomless. What do you think it's all about, Ben?"

"I don't know," said Ben, dismounting. "But I shore aim to walk from here. Last time I rode into this swamp some *pelado* parted my hair with a bullet!"

Ben led off, with Jim close behind him. Trees made a solid roof overhead, shutting out the sunlight, and they traveled on in a

gray and dismal gloom. Mosquitoes shrilled overhead. Insects pestered them. Ben came up out of a muddy and quivery bog and parted the wet-glistening grass of a little island with his hands. He recoiled so suddenly that Jim shoved against him, and both heard the fearful threshing of a rattlesnake's buttons in the high grass.

"Lordy," Ben breathed. "He jus' missed me!" The Negro's face was grayish, strained, and sweat poured in a steady trickle from his chin. He was shaking uncontrollably.

Jim watched him crush the swamp rattler's head with a knotted live-oak limb, and cut off its rattles. He felt sick inside, with his nerves raw. Both men were remembering how old Dan Tucker had died, held down while a poison-bloated sidewinder struck him in the face.

Ben stuck the buttons in his hat band and led off again, following the narrow channels cut through the thick undergrowth by the shallow bayou. Several times they saw cotton-mouths and moccasins wriggling through the grass, and once a small alligator slid into the scum-coated water ahead of them. Cypress and live-oak stumps made twisting, grotesque shapes around them and green flies swarmed up ahead.

They were near the sea, Jim knew. The smell of salt water stung his nostrils and he could hear the faint wash of waves on a beach. Then a hot wind moved through the swamp with its rank odors of rotten mud and stagnant filth and decay, and Jim grabbed Ben's arm.

"You smell what I do?"

"I sho' do," Ben exclaimed. "That means they been bringing them cattle in here an'—"

CHAPTER FIVE

Plea of a Feudist

THE shot came from off to the left. A slug clipped bark from a tree inches from Jim's head a split second before the crashing report reached his ears. He jerked back into a tangle of reed-cane, dragging Ben with him, and another shot slammed through the cane over their heads with the staccato sound of drum-beats.

Jim had a momentary glimpse of gray powdersmoke and a gaunt, hulking figure

limned against the greenness of the yonder ferns. He brought up his six-shooter and laid a pattern of four shots on that target, and the man fell back into the ferns and afterward they heard him crashing off through the undergrowth.

"Maybe you didn't hit him," Ben said, "but you sho' scared him out of a year's growth!" He added, worriedly, "Mista Jim, that looked to me like ol' Sut LeBreau. What do you think that fish-smellin' old codger was doing here in the swamp?"

"I don't know," Jim answered, "but I would sure like to find out. Let's trail him."

Ben immediately shoved after the man, slipping soundlessly through the tangled ferns and pointing out an occasional muddy track. They came to a muddy, ankle-deep rut of water and there the tracks stopped. Ben turned down it toward the sea.

Salt grass appeared in scattered clumps and thickened into a solid mat underfoot, and sunlight broke through the foliage above. Ben worked his way through a last tangle of black thorny brush and they came out on the beach near Duro Point and the old warehouse and jetty.

"Look!" the Negro exclaimed.

Jim saw a lean, unkempt man with a black beard run down the rotting planks of the jetty and jump into a boat tied up there. He lifted his voice in a quick shout as the man bent to the oars. "It's ol' Sut, all right," said Ben, and lifted his rifle. Jim knocked it down. The fisherman was carrying no visible weapon. He strained mightily at the oars and the boat slid out of sight around the point.

"He was shore boogered," said Ben. "You think he was jus' prowling, Mista Jim?"

"I don't think so," answered Jim, thoughtfully. The sight of that bearded, stooped figure had touched a responsive chord in his memory. He had seen the man before, but he could not remember where. He worried over that as he and Ben went along the beach to the jetty.

The old warehouse stood empty, abandoned, its brush roof tumbled in and the door gone from rusty hinges and hoof-prints and droppings of cattle on its hard-packed dirt floor. Cattle in large numbers had not been here, however, nor had stock been driven over the moulded planking of the jetty.

But Jim thought he knew what had happened to the cattle, and dark thoughts poured through his mind as he and Ben Milam skirted the swamp and returned to their horses. His vague remembrance of the old fisherman troubled him. He had the feeling that all parts of this puzzle were there in his head if he could just put them together.

"We'd better sleep in the brush again to-night, Ben," he said as they rode along. "We've discovered something—an' we may wish we hadn't! I've a hunch we'll be having visitors soon."

JIM'S hunch proved correct, but the identity of their lone visitor astounded him. When they rode up to the ranchhouse at noon, a trim little bay mare with three white stockings stood ground-hitched near the yard gate. On the mare was a Mexican saddle garnished with silver, with the Turkey Track brand inlaid in silver on the saddle skirt. The mare wore the Turkey Track brand on its hip.

Ben Milam swung down and stood behind his horse, his rifle resting across the saddlehorn. Jim rode up to the gate and covered the door with his sixgun.

"Come on out of there," he ordered, flat-toned, and then almost fell out of the saddle as Sara Sublett stepped to the porch, looking trim and lovely in a *vaquero's* tight-legged *charro* pants and embroidered jacket.

"Go ahead and shoot, Mr. Rankin," she said coolly. "It's what I would expect of you."

The color drained from Jim's face. "What—what are you doing here?" he demanded.

Her chin went up, proudly, defiantly. "I came to ask you to spare my grandfather's life," she told him, with just a trace of fear in her voice. "Everybody knows that you came back here to kill him. It was as plain as truth in your eyes yesterday at the slaughter-pens."

"My God, girl!" Jim swallowed hard. He holstered his gun while his thoughts raced wildly ahead. "You think I'm a pretty raw character, don't you?"

Sara's eyes flashed. "Your father killed my uncle," she retorted. "A Rankin killed my father. Your clan has shot down every member of our family, with the exception of

grandfather and Webb Tate and myself. Why do you want to stir up that old trouble? Why don't you ride out of the country and let us live in peace?" It was a heart-felt plea that touched Jim Rankin as words had never done.

"This feud was not my doing," he answered woodenly. "It was something started a long time before I was born, but I aim to be in at the finish. My brother and father were killed in this very yard by renegades in your grandfather's hire. I'm the only Rankin left. This is my home. I'll never leave it again—in spite of the devil and old Sam Sublett!"

"Grandfather will never bother you," Sara said. "Why can't you leave him alone?"

"I'm not worried about bothering him," Jim said grimly. "It's him bothering me that keeps me sleepin' in the brush nights."

"But this feud has got to stop!" she protested.

Again Jim shook his head. "My father tried to stop it. He was a smart enough man to see that powder and lead didn't settle anything. But old Sam had the blood brand on his soul, and he hired the Jacks to ambush us. It was him kept spurrin' his shirt-tail kin on to more quarrelin'."

"I—I almost believe that," Sara said in a small, shocked voice. She looked at Jim with a growing wonder in her eyes. She made a helpless gesture. "I don't even know what it all started over. I just know that grandfather has been hating the Rankins, and plotting to kill the Rankins, as long as I can remember."

JIM nodded. "It was that way with old One-Ear Rankin, and other die-hard members of our clan. They were always honin' for trouble. But my father was an honest, God-fearing rancher, Miss Sara, and he tried to keep out of the fight. His death, and the killing of my brother, was what dragged me into it. Now I'll have to fight or get killed. It's as simple as that."

He looked keenly at this girl, and his most apparent emotion at the moment was one of regret. She was bright-eyed and spirited, clean of line as a young race horse. She had the power to stir him deeply, to make him feel bitterly the ancient enmity that kept them apart.

It came to him with a little shock that he

was on the verge of falling in love with the girl! He steeled his mind, remembering old hates, and then all of that was swept away by her next words.

"Why—why you're not *bad*," she whispered. "You don't have horns. You're just like the young men I've met at *bailes*, and church suppers—only you're bitter. I could like you, Jim Rankin, if—"

She broke off, and Jim said huskily, "I do like you, Sara! I think you're the nicest girl I ever met."

And suddenly he was off the horse and she was in his arms, and Ben Milam looked away and rubbed at his eye with a brush-scattered thumb.

"People make their own troubles," Sara said, looking up at Jim with tears in her eyes. "We've all been so blind about this feud, when all the time hating and killing was wrong, and we knew it. We've got to stop it, Jim."

"There's only one way to stop it," Jim answered miserably, "and that's for me to ride out of the country. Your grandfather will never forget that I'm a Rankin. He'll probably hide you alive when he finds out you've been here!"

"He's got to see the truth," she cried. "He's hoodwinked us long enough with his hatin' and his killin' and the black way he's looked at things."

Jim twisted his hat in his hands. "I-I like you a lot, Miss Sara—maybe too much. But you can't stop this trouble." He had his moment of grim insight. "Sam Sublett knows I'm back, and he'll hunt me down like a dog. And when I stand against him next time, I'll be rememberin' that he hired Lige Jacks to ambush my father and brother. Nothing good will come of this feudin' . . . for us."

She lifted her eyes to his, and what he saw there made his heart beat faster. "But you won't start anything unless he does first?" she pleaded. "Promise!" She clutched his arms.

And Jim Rankin, full of new and strange desires, and wildly conflicting emotions of hate and wonder, promised. He watched her ride away with the feeling that something wonderful, and something terrible, had happened.

"You sho' are asking for trouble, Mista Jim," was the way Ben Milam Tucker expressed it.

CHAPTER SIX

Swamp Ghosts

TWO nights later, Jim and Ben Milam were awakened by the catch-dog's warning growl. It was past midnight and a full moon rode the heavens. They were sleeping out in the brush, well away from the house and corrals, and Jim rolled out of his saddle blanket to see a faint glow of light in the direction of the ranch.

In a moment a red burst of fire lifted above the brush and the wind carried the smell of wood smoke and scorched timbers. His heart lurched and he grabbed up his gun.

"They've fired the house!" he exclaimed.

Ben came erect beside him. They stared for a moment at the lifting flames, then headed toward them on the run. Sparks were flying with the wind and they came out on the edge of the matorral and saw three riders wheel out of the yard in the growing light.

Men were holding a dark mass of cattle below the corrals and there were two other horsemen on the edge of the far shadows. A voice lifted in command.

The brush roof caught in a burst of flames that lighted up the yard like day, and Jim thought he recognized one of the night-riders he had seen before. This looked like the same tough, gun-hung crew.

One of the men piled brush and dry weeds against the barn and struck a match to the kindling, and the expanding core of light etched a gaunt, bearded face marred by an ugly grin. The man came erect and stepped to his horse.

"That's Sut LeBreau!" Ben growled, flat on his belly behind a clump of brush.

It was the old fisherman, but now he wore a cowpuncher's brush-scarred jacket and chaps and sat the saddle as though he had ridden all of his life. The brush-and-pile structure was whipped into a seething mass of flames by the wind, and Jim saw Turkey Track's ramrod, Cal Fremont, in the little group, his handsome features reddened and made sinister by the leaping flames.

"That'll keep the coon and that Rankin kid out of our hair, Cal," LeBreau laughed, lifting his voice to be heard above the roaring fire. "Old Sam will detain the law long

enough for us to load these brush-poppers on the cattle boat and have it long gone for Mexico."

"And the proceeds will buy a nice wedding present for my bride-to-be, Lige," Fremont grinned back. "Ain't a luckier man in the country than me, marryin' up with that purty thing."

"Old Sam shore kicked about the marriage," the other chuckled. "But I knowed he'd see it our way."

Watching the riders fade into the darkness after the herd of stolen cattle, Jim Rankin felt sick and weak inside. Lige, Fremont had called the old fisherman—Lige Jacks! One of the renegade Jacks brothers who had raided Soledad Ranch with the Subletts and killed Jim's father and brother.

COLD, clammy sweat bathed his face and wild, disconnected thoughts poured through his mind. Sara was marrying handsome, spur-jingling Cal Fremont, who was ramroding this night-riding crew. Old Sam Sublett raised hell with the law about rustlers stealing him blind, and all the time his punchers were doing the rustling. Sublett's punchers and Lige Jacks, who was some kin to the Turkey Track ramrod.

Jim had thought there was something familiar about the old fisherman's twisted, evil face, only Lige Jacks hadn't been wearing a beard three years ago. He remembered what Ben Milam had said about Ollie Jacks having a son. Cal Fremont was probably that son—Cal Jacks. Both men were as deadly and dangerous as rattlesnakes. And both were in Sam Sublett's pay.

That was a body blow to Jim Rankin. He thought of how Sara had tricked him, and rage mingled with despair churned through him. She was a Sublett, after all! She had smiled at him, and slanted her looks at him, and hated him all the time.

And then the rage chilled and he was cool and remembering. Two could play at this game. Turkey Track must be mighty short-handed with its ramrod and half a dozen riders here to burn him out. That thought had no sooner occurred to him than he had decided to set a few fires himself. That was one way to get back at Sam Sublett—and Sara.

"Come on," he told Ben grimly. "We're going to return this visit to Turkey Track and square a few debts."

An hour later, they had crossed the *laguna* and were riding toward the ranch headquarters, dark except for a single light that burned in the big 'dobe house. They left their mounts in a live-oak motte near the corrals and went forward on foot, warily and with their guns up and ready.

"See those haystacks behind the barn?" Jim whispered. "They're just inviting a match, and the wind will whip the flames to most of the other buildings. We—"

He froze in his tracks. Up near the house a man had groaned out a horrible death rattle, and a shuddering wail burst like a cry of the damned in the night.

"My God!" Ben gasped. "What was that?"

"We'll find out," Jim said, and started for the ranchhouse.

A MAN lay dead in the ranch yard. This was Webb Tate, shot through the head and killed instantly. The kitchen door was open and lamp light made a yellow splash across the yard. Jim eased up to the door, gun cocked and ready, and recoiled so violently that he almost knocked Ben down.

Sam Sublett lay spread-eagled on the floor, his hands and feet tied with rawhide thongs to stakes driven in the hard-packed 'dobe dirt. A tallow-drip candle with a globe fitted over it rested precariously on the edge of a table. The light etched the dirty-gray pallor that spread over the old man's swollen, bloated face, and reflected in his glassy eyes. Every muscle in his body was strained tight and quivering.

"It's—it's just like what happened to old pappy!" Ben whispered, pointing to the slimy coils of a rattlesnake with its tail snubbed to the table leg, its blunt head upraised and wicked eyes burning redly at Sublett. The marks of its fangs showed in several places on Sublett's splotchy cheeks, and the old man's violent threshing had kept the huge diamondback roused to a killing fury.

"Great God!" Jim ripped out, and sent a thundering shot at the snake that left its head a bloody, mangled mess. Its wild rattling beat against the walls of the little room. He cut the binding on its tail and threw it into the yard, and afterward they could hear it rolling and threshing about the yard, and the catch-dog's ominous growling.

Jim hurriedly cut the bindings on Sub-

lett's wrists and ankles, and placed the light on the floor near his head. The old man was far gone. The poison had paralyzed his cheeks and thickened his speech, and the shock of it showed in his glazed eyes.

"They—they thought I had money," he managed to mutter, "and tried to make me talk, same as they did Kinney that time I had Ollie and Lige Jacks hung. It was Ollie's kid, Cal, who cut Lige down, and it was him that—hired out to me later as Cal Fremont. I'd never seen the kid, and didn't know him. Him and Lige left me like this. I—I didn't tell 'em anything, because I knowed they aimed to kill me anyway. But they—they took—"

His voice faded to an unintelligible whisper. He tried desperately to speak, and Jim put his ear close to the old clan leader's lips and caught his last words.

"They took Sara!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Vengeance Rides the Night

SUBLETT was dead, and Jim Rankin knew a moment of wild panic. Sara was blameless; he had failed her! Even now she was a prisoner of the Jacks and their renegade crew on Maverick Island, and Jim could guess that Cal Jacks meant to take her to Matamoras with him on the cattle boat. This was the gang's last big steal, their final cleanup before quitting the country.

In that moment of clawing apprehension, he still had a moment's pity for this iron-willed old man who now lay dead at his feet. He knew what it would mean to Sara. And then he realized that with Sublett and Webb Tate both out of the picture, he and Sara were the last of the fighting clans. And he knew the Rankin-Sublett feud was dead too.

But somehow that didn't seem important any longer. Rage and a numbing fear for Sara's safety were at odds in his mind as he and Ben left the house and raced for their horses. Lige Jacks had killed his father, and the old outlaw and his renegade nephew had been responsible for the torture-killing of old Dan Tucker. Only the Jacks were capable of such brutal crimes.

They shoved their horses through the breakers and headed for Maverick Island, a

low-lying shadow three miles away across the *laguna*. Ben had stopped to cut the buttons from the dying rattlesnake, and they gave out their dry, musty humming as he tied them in his hat band. The Negro's eyes held violence as they waded out on the beach and started across the island, and his face was seized with the animal wildness again.

The house and barn had burned to smouldering piles of glowing ashes. They raced past the ruins and on across the salt-grass flats toward the opposite side of the island, pushing their mounts to the limit. They reached the beach and turned down it toward Duro Point, and now they could see brush fires on the beach near the jetty. The tall masts of a ship, riding on mooring lines, stood out starkly against the sky.

The two men left their winded mounts in a clump of black mesquite, and stole forward on foot. The cattle were being held in a compact bunch near the jetty. Now Jim could make out every detail of the ship. She was a two-master, moored to the rotting piling, lying well down in the water because about half of the cattle were already abroad. The sails gleamed a dirty-white in the glow of the brush fires and the name *San Felipe* was painted on the box-like stern.

SAILORS stood along the jetty and near the deck pens, and cowpunchers whooped and yelled, barely heard above the discordant bawling and horn-clacking of the cattle. In all of this noise and confusion there was system. Riders shoved brush-wild steers along the jetty and deck hands prodded them up the gangway into the hold of the vessel. The more recalcitrant animals were snared by the horns and dragged on board with a winch.

A squat, swarthy figure wearing a marine cap with salt-crusts and gold braid stood near the ruins of the warehouse with Lige Jacks, drinking out of a long-necked *tequila* jug and watching the loading. There was no sign of Cal Jacks or Sara Sublett, but once Jim saw Lige glance toward the warehouse and leer at the *San Felipe's* captain.

If there were any guards or outposts, Jim had not seen them. He motioned to Ben to cover him and crept through the brush toward Jacks and the captain. In a

moment he was close enough to hear what they were saying, and his heart squeezed dry at Lige's words.

"She's purty enough to frame and set on the dresser to look at," the bearded outlaw grinned at the captain. "An she's clawed Cal up worse'n a wildcat. But he'll tame her. Cal has a way with women."

Jim looked wildly about him. He knew it was useless for him and Ben to tackle the outlaws and the ship's crew alone. The captain was wearing a brace of ornate pistols, and most of the seamen were armed. Then Jim looked at the roaring brush fires, and at the shaggy longhorn cattle with bushy, burr-matted tails. An ugly glint came into his eyes.

Two riders were holding the herd, and two more cut off little bunches of cattle and shoved them toward the jetty as the loading went on. Jim waited until the men on the jetty were busy with a new bunch of cattle, then suddenly sprang to his feet and grabbed up a blazing live-oak limb.

It was a wild, desperate chance, and it worked. He was in among the cattle before he was spotted. One of the outlaws yelled and dragged at his gun as Jim slapped his fiery torch against the burr-matted tail of the closest steer, and a shot missed him by inches and struck another steer with a ripping, tearing sound.

Flames licked up the animal's tail and scorched its butt, and its panic-stricken bawling lifted above the noise of the herd as it bolted toward the jetty. Jim fired another longhorn's tail as the outlaw rode at him, holding his fire now for fear of stampeding the cattle.

But the damage was done. The cattle were already spooked by the strangeness of their surroundings and the crazed bawling of the beasts on the ship. The whole herd whirled and plunged toward the jetty in a solid mass, hoofs thundering and great horns clashing like cymbals, with the second steer wild with terror as its tail burst into flames.

The riders were thrown aside by the sheer weight of the stampede, and the jetty rumbled to the smash of a hundred hoofs. Men leaped from the jetty and Jim saw a horse impaled on wicked horns and tossed after them. The cattle hit the end of the jetty and the leaders tried to whirl back, and a solid, heaving mass of bone and flesh

struggled there for a moment and then spilled into the sea.

Jim whirled through the ruck of the stampede, dodging one wall-eyed old cow as she lunged at him, and raced through dust and drifting smoke toward the warehouse. The shattering crash of timbers told him that the cattle in the deck pens had broken out and were running rampant over the decks of the *San Felipe*. He heard a scattering of shots and a man's shrill, fear-crazed yell.

The captain had started down the beach when the herd broke loose, and now he swung back and saw Jim and lifted a warning shout that was lost in the pounding din. Jim flung a shot at the man and saw him sprint for the safety of the jetty.

Dust roiled in front of the warehouse, turned red by the fire's reflection, and through that reddish haze Jim saw Lige Jacks standing near the corner of the building. The bearded outlaw had a six-shooter in his hand. His eyes burned like live coals in the gray parchment of his face.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Warehouse of Death

"ME AN' YOU, LIGE!" Jim yelled at him. "You killed my father. I'm giving you a lead ticket to hell to square accounts!"

"Me and you, Rankin!" Lige Jacks grinned back.

Then they were walking toward each other, guns crashing and jarring in the sudden quiet that followed the stampede. Jim felt the breath of a bullet past his ear. A slug slammed into his side, knocking him half around. He was firing by instinct, barely conscious of the pistol kicking against the heel of his hand.

His last slug hit Lige Jacks with a ripping, tearing impact that sent him staggering back against the warehouse wall. The outlaw hung there for a moment, his eyes turning blood-red with pain as he clutched at his belly. Then he sagged down in a loose, crumpled heap beside the building and moved no more.

Jim stood with his empty gun dangling from his fingers, too sick from shock to reload. One man was left on horseback, and this man spurred at Jim, fired and

missed. He was bringing his gun down for a second shot when the thin, flat crack of Ben Milam's rifle sounded and he tumbled headlong to the sand. His horse shied away, empty stirrups flapping.

A gun flamed from the darkness of the warehouse, and Jim went down as if his legs had been roped out from under him. Another slug kicked sand into his face as he crawled around the corner of the warehouse, out of reach of Cal Jacks' gun. From there he looked back over the beach.

The stampeding cattle had swept the jetty clean of riders and men, and cattle were still running amuck on the decks of the *San Felipe*. Ben Milam fired and wounded a man who had ventured out on the beach, and thereafter things were quiet. There were no windows in the warehouse, and only one door, and Cal Jacks couldn't reach either of them with his gun.

While Jim was considering this, Ben Milam came up and dropped beside him in the sand.

"You hurt bad, Mista Jim?"

"I've got a couple of busted ribs," Jim managed, tightly, "and one leg that ain't doing me no good. But I'll be all right. What's the next move, Ben?"

"You take this rifle and keep them *pelados* in the water," Ben said. "I got a chore to do." Sweat made an oily smear on the big Negro's face and his eyes glittered almost insanely in the moonlight. Before Jim could say anything, he was gone.

Cal Jacks was cursing the men in the water, urging them to come to his rescue. His voice sounded close at hand, and Jim knew he was near the door. Then Sara Sublett screamed somewhere near the back of the building, and Jim heard the dull thud of a heavy body dropping to the floor.

"What's the matter there, gal?" Cal Jacks called sharply. "What was that?"

The outlaw's boots made little scuffing sounds on the 'dobe floor as he shifted position, and there were other sounds. Jim started crawling laboriously toward the door, dragging his game leg.

Jacks called again, "What's the matter there, gal?" and it was Ben Milam's voice that answered him.

"Missy Sara ain't here no more," said the Negro. "There's just me and you—me and you and this sidewinder!" Ben's harsh,

ringing laugh pealed through the room and thereafter Jim heard the steady, castanet-hum of a rattlesnake.

The rafters echoed to the crash of a six-shooter inside the building, followed on the split-second by another shot.

"I'm counting 'em" said Ben Milam, and laughed like a madman, his great booming voice going on and on. "You got two shots left. Then I'm coming after you. Me and this sidewinder, like you done my father."

Jim heard a sound on the roof and looked up to see Sara's slim shape poised above him. She jumped and landed near him in the sand. Her face was drained of color.

"It—it was Ben," she whispered. "He dropped through a hole in the roof and boosted me out. He's—he's mad, Jim!" She gripped his arm.

Ben's insane laugh went on and on, threaded through and through by the vicious rattling of the sidewinder. Cal Jacks fired again, and Ben yelled, "I'm coming for you, Jacks!" There was another shot, and then a wild, panic-stricken scream that was cut off abruptly.

Jim dragged himself to the door, heedless of Sara's attempts to hold him back. "Ben!" he said shakily. "Ben, are you all right?"

"I sure am, Mista Jim," answered the Negro, and stumbled through the door.

He was unhurt, but he leaned against the wall like a man tired to the point of collapse. The animal wildness has gone from his eyes, leaving them weary and strained. He wiped blood from his knife on the door-sill and showed Jim what he held in his other hand.

It was the snake's tail buttons he had cut from the rattler at Sublett's, stuck on a broomweed stem.

"I killed him, Mista Jim," he said, as from a vast distance. "I killed him for ol' pappy."

FOUR of the outlaws were dead and the other three had taken to the water to escape the stampeding cattle. One of these had a broken arm, and another had been ripped across the back by a razor-sharp horn. Most of the *San Felipe's* crew had taken to the riggings, and below them milled the cattle that had crashed out of the deck pens.

Ben rounded up the three outlaws and the *San Felipe's* mate and captain, and herded them along the jetty to a point where he could watch the men in the riggings. He ordered all of these to throw their weapons overboard, and put a rifle shot over their heads to emphasize his command. It was a well-whipped, completely-cowed gang of ruffians that he now held.

Jim told Sara that she would have to ride to Pass Medina for the sheriff, since he was in no condition to sit a saddle. He said for her to have the sheriff look through Dutch Hennig's packery for Turkey Track hides, and arrest the packery owner.

"The Jacks gang were rustling cattle from the mainland and skinning them out for the hides and tallow alone," he explained, trying to keep the pain out of his voice. "They dumped the carcasses in a bottomless bog near Bosque Bayou, so there was never any trace left of the stolen herds. But the smell of the place will give it away. Lige Jacks posed as a fisherman, and carried the hides to market in his boat."

Sara was busy ripping his shirt into strips and binding up his wounds. She was crying a little. "I know," she said. "Lige and Cal were drunk when they started out, and bragging a lot. This was supposed to be their last raid."

"I'll bring a doctor, Jim. Your leg is broken, and that rip in your side is going to be painful for a long time. But you'll be all right. Jim . . ."

She had dreaded this next question all along. "What about grandfather?"

Jim looked away, and suddenly all of the hate was drained out of him, forever, and he was sorry that Sam Sublett was dead.

"I knew something had happened. He's dead, isn't he? If he hadn't thrown in with the Jack's to fight you, he would be alive today. But Jim—"

He looked back at her, at the warmth that flooded her eyes. "Yes?"

"That won't make any difference with us, will it, Jim?" she whispered.

Jim shook his head, and there was something in his eyes that hadn't been there for long, bitter years: happiness. He smiled up at her. "No," he said. "It won't make any difference. And we'll do all right on Maverick Island—with Ben Milam as our cow boss!"

By Harry
Van Demark



The Rangers' animals reeled from exhaustion.

Blizzard Rangers

Company C set out on the skull-strewn desert Apache trail—and found their murderous quarry had an ally, from whose blasting attack the Rangers could never escape alive!

THERE was plenty of excitement at the headquarters of Company C, Frontier Battalion, Texas Rangers, those winter days of 1879-80. The company, under the command of Captain G. W. Arrington, was established at that time at the headwaters of the Brazos River in Western Texas.

To the West, the great Staked Plains

unfolded like an endless blanket; and beyond them, extending to the Pecos River in New Mexico, was an unexplored region without white habitation and enveloped in barren desert.

During the early winter, hostile Apaches from this unknown region were coming into Texas, making numerous raids upon the stock of the scattered settlers living on the

eastern edge of the great, dreary plains.

It was the duty of the Texas Rangers to break up these raids and follow the marauders in an attempt to locate their hiding places—if possible, to exterminate them.

Trouble in the Southwest of those days was from either one of two sources: bad men took to shooting up the country, or there was just plain Indian trouble. To the early settlers, the latter was by far the most dreaded. And Indian trouble there was now. Too many raids. Something had to be done.

The climax came on December 28, 1879, when information reached Ranger headquarters that Indians had raided a ranch some twenty miles away. Captain Arrington picked twelve men, including himself, loaded two days' rations on pack mules, and started for the ranch. They arrived there at five o'clock, soon picked up the Indians' trail.

It led them due west into the desolate plains. The Rangers traveled along this trail until nightfall, when they made camp. But there was no comfort for the weary men. A misty rain began falling. Soon the temperature was at the freezing point, and by morning everything was covered with ice. But Ranger duty took no count of weather conditions. There was a job to be done and speed was the essential factor.

After traveling all day in the bitter cold, the Rangers reached Double Lakes, where they again made camp. They had covered sixty miles since morning. Early the next day, they prepared to resume the chase. From Double Lakes, the trail of the Apaches pointed out toward a treacherous country unknown to white men.

Here Captain Arrington hesitated, undecided as to the wisdom of following the trail directly into this desert region. And he had good cause to ponder:

A few years before—in 1876—Captain Nolin of the Tenth United States colored cavalry had followed a band of Indians from the Staked Plains over this same route. In the midst of the desolation west of Double Lakes, their water supply had given out and the men had become almost crazed from thirst.

Captain Nolin had soon lost control of his command. From mental anguish, as well as from physical suffering, his men were not amenable to discipline. The cap-

tain realized the seriousness of the situation, wanted to turn back to Double Lakes. Some of the men refused to turn back, and wandered out into the desert in search of water. They were never seen again.

An extra horse had been brought along. Captain Nolin ordered the animal's throat cut, and the blood was used by the remaining soldiers to quench their thirst. The captain eventually returned to Double Lakes with only a few of his original command. He filed a full report of his adventures to the War Department, which then forbade any army officer to lead troops into that desert region.

With the memory of Captain Nolin's ill-fated expedition in mind, Captain Arrington decided to pursue a different course. Sending a man back to headquarters for additional water supplies and kegs, the Rangers marked time at Double Lakes until he returned.

Their supplies renewed, the Rangers then turned northwest and after a two-day march arrived at what was commonly known as the Yellow Houses, a huge bluff formation about 150 feet high and running from north to south about three miles. The bluff was of yellowish limestone and contained several caves in its face.

At the foot of the bluff, a fresh water spring solved the water problem. Here, too, was the camp of several buffalo hunters. From them the Rangers secured buffalo hides which they fashioned into saddlebags. They fitted their water kegs into these bags and strapped them to the pack mules.

A messenger was sent back to Ranger headquarters with dispatches and the twelve men proceeded on to Silver Lake, where they camped for the night. It was still bitter cold. Every spring in the lake region was frozen over.

It was Captain Arrington's plan to turn southwest into the desert from this point, hoping to intersect the Indian trail they had deserted at Double Lakes.

They started out at sunrise and after traveling thirty miles came to the real desert. The land was desolate-looking, almost bare of vegetation. The horses sank up to their knees at times in the sand, which was almost white as snow. Again camp was made for the night. Again the journey was resumed in the morning.

AS THE sun mounted higher, its shimmering rays beat down upon the sand and the Rangers began to see what every desert traveler beholds at times—mirages—pictures of wonderful lakes and trees.

The water supply was running low. The Rangers' lips became parched under the glaring rays of the sun and sand. They traveled all day, suddenly noticed that they were approaching a plateau, surrounded by trees. It was not a mirage as some of the Rangers thought, but a real plateau. At its western base nestled a lake.

On the shore of the lake, they found the remains of several horses which had been killed and stripped of their flesh. They also found an Indian sign painted on a bleached buffalo shoulder bone. It was in pictures, but they interpreted it as meaning that the Indians knew they were being followed and were warning other redmen.

The Texans were in a hostile Indian country now, 250 miles from their base at the head waters of the Brazos, and far beyond the boundary line of Texas. Captain Arrington reluctantly decided not to travel further in the chase.

Realizing that the Indians made their raids only on moonlight nights, the Rangers resolved to stay at the lake a few days and catch them unawares as the redskins passed along its shores on their way to the Texas plains.

They could not kill wild game for fear the reports of their rifles would betray their position to any Indians about the lake region. They faced starvation.

After fifteen days, Captain Arrington was forced to send two men out to shoot antelope. They returned the following day and reported that they had come in contact with a band of Indians who had tried to steal their tethered horses. The redmen had fled when the Rangers opened fire.

The Rangers knew then that they were surrounded, greatly outnumbered, and could not hope to put up a fight except in self-defense. So Arrington gave orders to break camp and they started on the long back trail.

The first day, they killed several antelope which they ate without bread or salt. During the midnight hours a blizzard blew up.

The temperature was ten degrees below

zero, and the blizzard was rapidly developing into a seemingly solid sheet of ice. As they moved along, their horses reeled from sheer exhaustion.

Their only chance for survival was to reach the Yellow Houses and take refuge in one of the caves. If they missed the great bluff, all was lost. But once there, the buffalo hunters would provide for them.

Eventually the storm subsided, the weather cleared, and they could get their bearings. More dead than alive, they came to a cliff, discovered that the Yellow Houses were not far away. Upon reaching the caves they found everything as they had left it. They secured some mesquite roots, broke up their wagon, took the wood into one of the caves and made a fire.

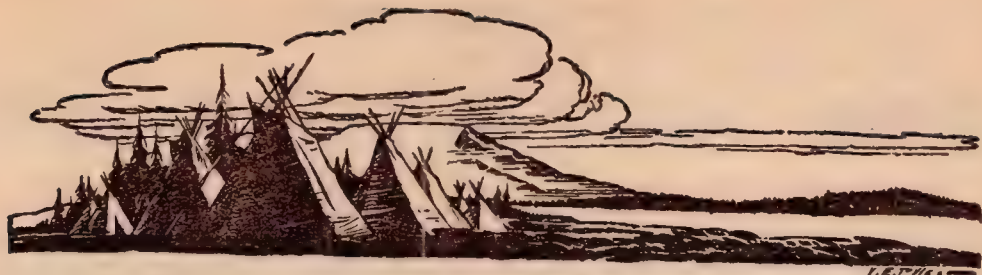
A Ranger with badly frozen hands and feet was brought in near the fire and his gloves and boots cut off with a knife. Several times he stuck his hands in desperation into the fire—and fainted from pain. His comrades dragged him outside each time and rubbed him with snow until he regained consciousness. Finally, they had to take him into the cave and place a guard over him to keep him away from the fire.

Several Rangers who were in better physical condition than their comrades were sent over to the buffalo camp for fresh meat, which Captain Arrington parceled out in small quantities. Some of the Rangers were so weak from hunger that when they attempted to walk they became blinded, faltered and sank to the ground.

They remained at the Yellow Houses for two days, then started on the homeward trail. They had been gone forty days, had traveled between 500 and 600 miles in severe winter weather, had been given up for lost, and had returned to headquarters without the loss of a man—truly a remarkable record.

There had been no Indian battles. But the Rangers had discovered the hideout of the red raiders, and this caused the Indians to move farther west. There were few raids on the Texas plains from that quarter thereafter.

Captain Arrington was given high commendation on a job well done—for writing another heroic chapter in the glorious record of the immortal Texas Rangers, pride of the West.



Trail of the Silver Scalp

By Jhan Robbins

Half savage Solomon warred on both red man and white—but the scalps he took were made of silver!

WHEN the westbound wagon-trains of white men hit the first fierce Indian resistance on the broad plains just East of the Rockies, war between them was instinctive and immediate. By 1830 they were locked in a death struggle that was to last half a century.

But the white warriors who laid a trail of blood and smoke for the lumbering wooden wagons to follow were more like the Indian savages they fought against than like the men who came in their footsteps.

Most famous of these half-savage whites was a fur trapper called Solomon. He was the most fearless and the most competent of the men who banded together with Kit Carson in the southwest.

Captive of the Indians for fifteen years, Sol was all his life torn between the dual cultures, so that when he was forced to live with the savage Kiowas who captured him, he did everything possible to preserve and emphasize his white heritage.

Fighting by the side of the Kiowas against their enemy tribes, he scorned to take a scalp. As a white man, it was beneath him. But when he took the trail against the Kiowas in company with Kit Carson and five other whites, he killed and scalped his former tormentors.

Solomon was born near Saltillo in Old Mexico, the son of Yankee rancher who had settled across the border. When he was five years' old, Comanches swooped south in a series of swift raids. They burned the ranch, murdered his parents and took the scared boy.

He was taught to use a bow and arrow. He watched, avidly, the raids on wagon-trains. He learned, expertly, then laid it aside in favor of the chief's shotgun. He felt that guns were a more becoming weapon for a white man's son. As clothing, he boasted only a loin cloth, but he covered his fair hair with a black, wide-brimmed hat that turned up after a wagon-train raid. Finally, the Comanches grew disgusted with him, and his original captors traded him to a drunken Kiowa chief. Sol was then fifteen.

The Kiowas were a small but very fierce warrior tribe. Always short of men, they depended on captives to supply manpower, and they took no nonsense from the white boy. His master was Old Lamey, a member of the council of the chief, A'date.

For a year, his life was dedicated to death. He trained himself like a warrior. He stole nourishing food at night. Finally he escaped.

He traveled four days and four nights, not daring to stop. The bay horse died at the edge of the Arkansas River. Sol Silver waded up the stream and pushed eastward.

Towards evening of the fourth day, Sol spied the rounded tops of a wagon-train jolting across the prairie. Waving his arms above his head, he galloped forward.

"Hi yee!" he shouted happily. To his hurt surprise, he was greeted by a whistling bullet. The wagons halted and curled into a circle.

(Continued on col. 96)

HIGHWATER HELL FOR HOMESTEADERS



Smashing Novelette of Barbed-Wire Tyrants



While his square-shooting, hard-working partners sweated to save their dying beef, young Rick Carlin rodded the vast Double-O range for the big time combine . . . unaware that his saddlemates were two-bit traitors—and his boss both his judge and executioner!

CHAPTER ONE

Hated Hombre

BYOND the government fence Double-O steers were already scattering hungrily over rich grass. Feed in the Piney National Forest was plentiful

up from the range. "Guess we're the first one in, too. Wonder what's holding up our small spread neighbors?"

None of Rick's four sullen companions offered comment. He eyed them grimly. As lazy a bunch as ever he'd had the tough luck to be saddled with—and itched to tangle with. Yet he couldn't fire them. Not



Lead fairly hailed around
Rick now.

By Cliff M. Bisbee

until he found out just what Abner Stromso's sinister game was. Stromso, local agent for the big K. C. Beef Company, had sent him the shiftless foursome when Rick first agreed to stay on at the Double-O.

"With that extra big cut of beef off our hands for the season we'll have time for some fence and barn chores," he told them. "Might take the kinks out of a few brons."

Milk-Eye Peters muttered a sullen curse and stringy Baldy Macklin grumbled openly to Splinter Dawes. "Might be we'll jest roundside in the bunkhouse fer some poker

—while east of the fence stretched the seared brown hills of an overstocked range.

Rick Carlin, Double-O foreman, wiped sweat and red dust from his face with a large bandanna. "Biggest bunch we ever put on the Piney," he observed. His level gray eyes searched the broad gully running

and a lot of good whiskey, huh, Splint?"

The hostility of the four was plain to read. Rick Carlin chose to ignore it, as he had ignored their truculence for past months. His job had become increasingly odious as time went on, yet he still knew no more about old Utah Darnell's "accidental" death than he had at the outset. And staying on the ranch after the K. C. took over had cost him the friendship of his neighbors, plus the confidence of Melva and Les Darnell, old Utah's son and daughter.

With a ragged sigh he pulled his mind to the present. "Funny the new ranger, Hutch Hager, wasn't on hand to count us in this mornin'." There was a frown on his straight dark brow. "It's almost like Hager knew the two-bit spreads wouldn't show up."

"Why worry about such no-count nesters as the Darnells and the Haynes's and all them others?" slab-faced Baldy Macklin grunted, with a knowing look at his pards.

Splinter Dawes grinned crookedly and nodded a hatbrim toward the slope ahead. "Ain't that a bunch of the fools yonder at the forks of the road? Don't see no cows."

Rick's eyes jerked up. Dawes was right. There was a group of riders ahead, and even from here he could make out the trim figure of Melva Darnell. He spurred out ahead of his men. The four rode along behind indifferently.

THERE was not a single greeting as Rick Carlin rode up to the group. With die-hard hope he sang out: "Howdy, folks! Where's all your shutter-ribbed cows? Or did you forget this is the date Hager set to open the Piney to cowmen?"

"We know who to thank if our cows are a little more shutter-ribbed than usual," Melva Darnell said crisply. Her deep brown eyes held contempt. "In a lean grass year the Double-O has increased its beef herds, while the rest of us were selling, as agreed."

Rick felt himself grow red under this accusation—which was true. Stromso had ordered the increase over Rick's protest, after the foreman had pledged to cut down at a joint range meeting early in the spring.

Les Darnell spoke up hotly. "Yeah, and now we know how-come you did that, Carlin. Hager sent us the bad news, just this morning, that your outfit has arranged a

monopoly on Piney graze!" Darnell was tall and square of shoulder.

"What you talking about, Les?" Rick asked quietly, while he dismounted to tighten a loose cinch. "Monopoly on Piney graze? I never heard of anything so loco. If Hager told you that he must've been hittin' the bottle too heavy."

Bewhiskered old Jared Haynes moved tired shoulders. "I don't misdoubt Hutch Hager's drunk, as usual," he muttered. "And we know your dirty K. C. outfit got him in there when Larson died of food pizenin'. But Les laid 'er straight when he said we been shut off gov'ment grass. You've growed mighty big for your britches, son, pullin' stuff like that."

"And you're heading," Les Darnell growled, "for one hell of a bad spill. When Darnells owned the Double-O we got along with the homesteaders. Maybe Dad was bullheaded in some ways—like never tellin' me and Melva about financial details of the ranch—but he was honest and square with his neighbors."

Rick nodded. "You're right, Les. Dead right. But don't forget I was Utah's foreman, and I had plenty friends around this range too. In fact, it was me that argued strongest for a fair cut of all range brands into the Piney each summer. Does it look like I'd have any personal call to go against my friends now; especially you and Melva?"

"That's what I don't understand about you," Melva said, her tone puzzled. "When Dad's buckboard tumbled into the gulch, that day in Carmody, Stromso told us he'd been forced to sell the Double-O mortgage to that cold-blooded K. C. company. They foreclosed—and Les and I found out just how broke we were. But we started out from scratch on a homestead claim—where you didn't have the guts! The way you jumped at Stromso's offer to let you stay on the ranch as K. C. ramrod showed pretty plain you had no real loyalty to the Darnells."

Les slid to the ground and faced Rick. His eyes were burning and his blunt chin was shoved out. "You know what we figure, Carlin?" he said harshly. "We had plenty of time to think about things since we lost the ranch. Maybe you're in cahoots with Stromso! There's sure somethin' putrid about the whole damn rotten deal!"

RICK tried to grin. "I'll put in with yuh on that last. But—"

Les Darnell was in no mood to listen. His boots crunched on the hard ground as he stepped forward.

"By hell, you've got a fist whipping coming, and now's as good a time as any! Haynes'll take your gun, Carlin. I'm not packin' one."

"Now wait a minute!" Rick grunted. "Don't be a fool, Les."

Melva's voice came biting. "So you're yellow, too!"

Pent-up emotions spilled over. If it was fight Les wanted, he'd give him fight. Rick thrust his gun into Jared's hands, then pivoted, facing Les.

"Very well, amigo. Have at it!"

Les came in fast, right fist hugging his chest, the left thrust out. Rick waited, his own balled fists only slightly raised from his sides, and his wide shoulders moving loosely. His right lashed upward suddenly into the flesh above Les's stomach.

Rick hit him again, in the jaw. Les cursed, surged around to bring his own right up to Rick's throat, but his hand shot over Rick's shoulder and he took a smashing blow in the ribs.

Rick had to give way in the next rush, lost his guard and took half a dozen hammering blows in the face and torso. They hurt plenty and in spite of himself his own brain began to tighten up. Les Darnell's labor on his homestead claim may not have cooled his quick temper, but it had certainly toughened his chunky frame. With an effort Rick fought off momentary panic, forced himself to cool, deliberate fighting. He blocked, twisted and ducked, presently saw an opening and surged into it with

every ounce of power in his big body.

This time his fist came up straight under Les's jutting chin, landing with a nasty crunching sound. The silent watchers took quick breaths as Les fell.

One of the K. C. riders bawled, "Jump him, Carlin! Tromp hell out of him!"

"That would be like him," Melva Darnell cut in sharply, as Les sat up groggily, clawing dust and blood from his face. "But this is stopping right here!"

Something in her voice brought Rick's gaze around—and he found himself staring into the muzzle of a gun in the girl's hand.

"Get back on your horse," she told him. "Jared, drop his gun into the holster."

Les crawled to his feet, arms swinging at his sides. His face was red. "What's the big idea, Sis? I'm not licked."

Melva shook her head. Womanlike, she'd forgotten that chore of instigating she'd pulled. There was a grim smile on her full lips. "I'd stack my chips on you, Les—every one of 'em. But this stuff is getting us nowhere. Don't forget we have a herd of mixed steers down on Antelope Flat, their bellies filled mostly with wind."

Rick waited, forced to grin at her blunt speech, even though the edge on it was mostly for his benefit. Les was sputtering in outrage, still full of fight, but old Jared Haynes reached over and dropped Rick's gun into place. "The gal's right, neighbor," Jared told Les. "We got work to do."

Before they left, Melva had some more advice for Rick Carlin. "Maybe if you're so innocent about the Double-O monopoly on Piney grass, you can go see Hager and get it straight. Maybe you *are* just a straw-boss even Ab Stromso doesn't trust with the big squeezes!"

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CHAPTER TWO

Double-O Death Trap

RIDING up through the first grassy meadows in the Piney National Forest, Rick's thoughts were gloomy. He pondered the diabolic cunning with which unseen forces could keep things going from bad to worse, once they started in that direction.

His four unwilling cowhands had headed off across the hills, with the avowed intention of procuring some booze in Carmody. Rick had let them go without argument, wanting to face Hutch Hager alone. He was taking the girl's tersely offered advice.

"Strawboss!" he mumbled as he rode. "I'm thinking Melva called the turn. Funny how it hurts to have somebody else pick out the tender spots you've been tryin' to hide from yourself. . . ."

Well, he had taken on the chore for a purpose. He didn't blame Les and Melva for figuring him for a scaly kind of juniper. Utah's accident had been a tough blow to Les and Melva. And it had proved only the beginning of grim events that moved swiftly to their end. The old man was scarcely buried when Abner Stromso rode out to the ranch and informed them he had been forced, weeks before, to sell the mortgage he'd held to the K. C. Beef Company. He said the transaction had been carried out with Utah's full knowledge and consent.

The K. C. had immediately foreclosed. Stromso became their local manager, and hired Rick Carlin to stay on the ranch as foreman. Rick's sole reason for agreement was his vague but persistent suspicion of Stromso's glib legal double-talk.

"So far nothing's clear," he muttered gloomily. "Except that I'm in a spot the devil himself wouldn't ask for. Ramrod for a dirty outfit that's squeezin' my friends and neighbors to death!"

IT WAS common talk around Carmody town that Ab Stromso had pulled strings in the name of the K. C. outfit to get his crony, Hutch Hager, into the ranger station. The former ranger, Larson, had died in the hospital at Boulder City from causes attributed by the doctor to a can of spoiled tomatoes. Rick Carlin was not too much surprised to find Stromso at the ranger's cabin in the Piney.

He left his mount's reins trailing in the dust and clumped through a litter of refuse up onto the rickety porch, where his boots rattled hollowly on loose boards. Inside the cabin there was the quick scrape of chairs on the floor and the suddenly hush of a gravelly, drunken voice.

When Rick stalked in without knocking Hager was sprawled in a chair at one end of the rough pine table. The ranger's flabby, purple-veined face twisted and his stubby fingers tightened around an empty whiskey glass.

"Hell," he grunted thickly. "It's nobody but Carlin."

Abner Stromso swung around in his chair. The K. C. agent was tall and thin, with lumpy cheekbones on either side of a razor-like nose. His eyes were like black stones in deep sockets and his mouth made a gash that trailed off to one side.

"You might knock, Carlin," Stromso rasped. "Happens me and Hager was talkin' business."

Rick's jaw tightened. "I've got a little piece of business with Hager myself."

"Hell you have," Hager mumbled. His hand groped for the half filled quart on the table. Stromso swore and grabbed the bottle first. Deliberately he banged it down hard on the ranger's fingers. Hager bel-lowed.

"You've had plenty likker," Stromso told him coldly, while the agent sucked his fingers in injured silence. Stromso stuck the bottle into his coat pocket and swung his gaze back to Carlin.

"What business you got with Hager?" he said crisply. "I'm givin' K. C. orders, remember. Your job's to carry 'em out."

Rick ignored this. "Listen, Hager. Darnell told me we've wrangled a monopoly on Piney graze. Is that straight?"

The fat ranger blinked. "What of it?" he grunted sullenly. "Grass is short this year."

"There's plenty grass," Rick asserted grimly. "More'n we've had in other years, far's the Piney goes. It's the range that was hit this season. Up here there's plenty underground seepage. Besides, why'd you send me word to bring in a bigger cut than ever before?"

Ab Stromso had been lighting a long black cigar. He clamped it down hard between yellow teeth and pointed a jutting finger at Rick.

"Strikes me you're bellyachin' on the wrong side of the fence, Carlin! I hired you as K. C. ramrod because I figured you knew the ranch and the range and could make us money better than a new man. . . ."

"Not because you thought my friendship with the homesteaders would keep them from getting too riled over K. C. high-handed plays?" Rick cut in. He laughed shortly, bitterly. "As a matter of fact I lost every friend on the range the day I agreed to stay with you. It seems they figure the Darnells got a raw deal."

"Hogwash!" Stromso exploded.

But the agent was saved further irate words by the sudden clatter of hoofs. Outside a lathered horse came to a skidding halt. The man was Splinter Dawes.

"Ab, I follered the nesters like you ordered, after Carlin here had a knock-down scrap with that Darnell jiggeroo. They ain't a'takin' this cut-back laying down."

RICK stared at the spindly puncher. Here was plain evidence that his riders had been under secret orders from Stromso all the time! Hager was pulling at his bulbous lips, but Stromso's voice came, thin.

"Well, spit it out, hombre. What're the homesteaders planning?"

A warped grin crossed Dawes' features. "Just about what you figgered, boss. Les Darnell and this feller Haynes kept yellin' at their pards. I heard 'em lay plans to run their herd up from Antelope Flats through Bobcat Gorge. They'll cut the fence there and shove their stuff into the Piney. They figger Hager won't have no way to get the beef out, once they scatter good up in the timber. Baldy and the boys are keepin' an eye on 'em and waitin' for orders."

Ab Stromso shot a triumphant look at Rick. "How you like them punkins, Carlin? You gettin' the picture?"

Rick felt his hands open and shut, the nails gouging into damp palms. The icy chill in the agent's tone told him a lot of things.

"You want to fix things so you can tangle

with the homesteaders, with the K. C. holding all the legal cards," Rick nodded slowly. He watched cigar smoke curl.

"Your guessin' ain't half bad, amigo," Stromso said. "With the homesteaders forcin' illegal entry, Hager calls on law abiding K. C. riders to help stop them. And with Darnell's crowd bottling themselves in Bobcat Gorge, who'll have the edge? The nesters? Not by a damn sight!"

Splinter Dawes joined his hoarse cackle with Stromso's jarring laugh. The little puncher misunderstood Rick's presence here. "Now you savvy why me and the boys was kinda jumpy this mornin', Carlin? Ab had us primed for trouble, only we wasn't sure how you stood with us. Now . . ."

He ran his eyes from one to another of the men in the room, and his words dribbled out.

Rick Carlin was standing at the door, a gun in his hand, covering them.

CHAPTER THREE

One Man Gamble

STROMSO'S chair legs hit the floor with a thud. "Don't be a fool, Carlin. I was aiming to cut you in. I'll double your wages—triple 'em! Only stay with—"

"With the K. C. and the Double-O?" Rick shook his head. "You're only trying to hold my gun. Anyway, I quit. I've some back wages coming. Use 'em, Stromso, to buy yourself a coffin."

He backed out through the doorway, allowing the screen to slam. "At the first sound of movement I start pouring lead through the door," he warned.

But he knew it was an idle threat, that his only chance lay in speed. He sprinted for his horse.

Abner Stromso voiced a wail of rage. "Dammit, Splinter, do something! You're closest to the door!"

"Not me, boss!" Dawes yelled. "I saw that hombre shoot."

Rick set his horse into an abrupt forward

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lurch, then sawed him at an angle up the slope. The animal grunted and dug in. The first shot came from the cabin then, whistling past with an angry whine. Ab Stromso, now in line with Rick's course, was firing from a window at the end. Grimly Rick zig-zagged to the right.

He lined out for the nearest tangle of trees. Stromso's gun snarled again, this time from the doorway. Pain streaked across Rick's left arm, above the elbow. He twisted around, slamming another quick shot at the door. Stromso was peering around the jamb, with gun and fist crammed through a hole ripped in the screen. He ducked back at Rick's shot, belching to his companions.

"Blast 'im, you chicken-gutted fools, 'fore it's too late! He'll get away and spoil the whole game! What the hell's the matter with you hombres?"

Apparently Hager and Dawes found sand enough to join in, because lead fairly hailed around Rick now, just as he hit the first fringe of brush and saplings. He had to watch his riding. A gnarled branch smacked into his side, scraping off skin through torn cloth. He hunched lower and plunged on through, coming out onto the wagon road that circled the small clearing below.

Then he saw he had made a big mistake in paying too much attention to the trio firing at him from below. -Because his horse plowed to a stop ten feet before three horses and riders blocking the road!

Baldy Macklin, Shard Bolbo and Milk-Eye Peters were waiting for him as he came through the brush. Brutish grins of pleasure twisted their lips and their rifles jutted at him from willing hands.

"Hold it, hombre!" Baldy Macklin roared. "Ear down your bronc whilst I find out what for Ab Stromso's pegging lead at your yellow hide."

Rick felt a long sigh go out of him. "Stromso was aiming to kill me, Baldy. "With," he added, "some reason." Then they took him away.

THE fat ranger had been left to guard Rick Carlin. The K. C. riders and their boss had pulled out for Bobcat Gorge to lay their bushwhack trap for the homesteaders.

"Ab Stromso ain't the kind of *paisano*

to do a job halfway," Hutch Hager bragged to Rick. The ranger's flabby bulk was squeezed into a rocking chair with only one arm on it. The other one had been broken off to allow room for Hager's spreading seat.

"Ab'll string his men along behind them big boulders flankin' the gorge, right where the fence cuts off the trail. He'll blast the homesteaders to hell—and do it legal."

"It's legal murder," Rick muttered.

Hager's puffy eyes blinked slowly. "They'll wait till the nesters cut the fence and start their herd through the break. Stromso'll have every right to chop down on 'em then, actin' on orders from me to protect gov'ment property."

"Only orders you ever gave was to your thirsty gullet to swell up and make more room for whiskey," Rick told him. The sweat came out on his forehead from the pain of ropes cutting flesh behind his back. His arms were pulled around the back of the chair, and lashed to the bottom rung.

Mention of whiskey made Hager run a dry tongue across his lips. He shifted the shotgun in his lap, twisting his head around toward the dish cupboard built along one wall of the shack.

Rick grinned. "Think maybe you got a bottle stashed away somewhere, huh? Dig it out. I'd like a snort myself."

Hager levered himself out of the chair and pawed around in the cupboard, in a clutter of pans and assorted junk. He brought out a pint bottle about half full. Leaning the gun against the wall he pried the cork from the bottle and tilted it up to take a long swig. He went back to the chair, smacking his lips like a hog. He hitched his chair within reach of the shotgun and sat there, nursing the bottle from time to time.

"You want some?" he asked Rick after a while. He leered over at the tied man, dull eyes blinking. Abruptly he took some liquor in his mouth, pursed his lips and squirted it into Rick's face. He laughed coarsely as Rick shook his head and cursed.

Then abruptly Hager again came out of the chair. He took up a heavy stick from the woodbox beside the stove. "No reason why I should set here watchin' you like a dog with a treed coon," he grunted. "I could lock you in the back room just as easy. Only I ain't takin' no chances while

I make the switch. Take a holt of your wind, hombre. . . ."

"Wait! Damn you, Hager—" Rick tried to hunch forward in the chair, scrunching his head down.

But the stick hummed through the air and the next thing Rick knew his head felt as if it had been rammed against a stone wall. There was one terrific blaze of red pain, then everything went black.

COMING out of it, Rick was conscious of the burning streak of fire across the top of his skull. He pried open his eyes and gazed about. He was in the small back room, which was lighted by one small grimy pain. In the front room the rocker creaked and a rasping snore lifted.

His arms were free and he flexed them slowly. The left one was sore from the skin wound. He got to his feet then, softly tried the door. It was locked.

The window was made to slide open against the wall. A nail had been driven in the channel as a stop. "Might squeeze through," he thought, "if I hold my breath out."

While he was working at the nail with his fingers the sound of hoofs came from the trail above. They faded into the pine needles, then swelled closer. Grimly he tugged at the nail. If Stromso was coming back already . . . The unseen riders came down the slope in front of the cabin, then saddle leather creaked as they dismounted. Rick guessed there were two of them.

Hager still slept out front, his snores sounding like a swarm of angry bees. Rick redoubled his efforts with the nail and it came loose. He slid the window back. Dust flew up in a choking cloud and cobwebs tore loose to fall across his face, clinging like sticky threads. With a long pause for breath he went cautiously through, head first.

He let himself down on the ground outside and straightened in time to hear a man's voice up front, choked with laughter. It came from inside the cabin and it was Les Darnell's voice!

"I'll be plumb switched, Sis!" Darnell said. "If this bloated juniper hasn't went and fell asleep—with a double barrel shotgun across his knees. . . ."

Melva Darnell's amused voice answered. "The gun is likely to shoot up the pink ele-

phants and thirty-foot snakes he's dreaming about. Better relieve him of it, Les. He's coming awake."

Hutch Hager's snoring changed into the mumbled curses of a man coming awake after a hard, drunken sleep. Then he uttered a startled grunt.

"Quit scrabblin' around in your lap for the scattergun," Les told him. "I was afraid you might think me and Sis were a couple of walkin' D.T's."

Rick grinned and stayed crouching there by the wall. He could picture Hager's staring, puffy eyes in the swollen face. "Hell and fall in it," he heard the ranger mutter, apparently shaking off the last stages of sleep. "What become of Carlin? Where'd you two—"

"I don't doubt Carlin was here connivin' for the dirty K. C. outfit," Les said. "But I doubt he treats you to the same brand of likker me and Melva brung along. Fetch a couple glasses from the cupboard, Sis."

Rick listened, wondering what this was all about. He heard the sound of a cork being pulled from a bottle, then the rich gurgle of whiskey running into a glass.

"Well now, friends!" The ranger creaked forward in his chair. "I'm mighty glad to see you know the proper openin' wedge to a palaver. Fire in your whiskers, Darnell. Your health, ma'am. Ah-h-h! Another? Don't mind if I do. Mighty sorry I had to keep you folks off the Piney this season. Nothin' else I could do, under the circumstances."

"We savvy how circumstances had you throwed and hogtied," Les said expansively.

"We've got a different slant on things," Melva put in. "What you might call a change of perspective. Looks like we'll just have to sell out, or cut our beef down to nothing."

"But we don't hold no grudge," Les said. "Glad to hear it," Hager rumbled, scraping his throat. "Maybe next year things'll be different."

And while Rick crouched there outside, the talk went on, pointless and getting nowhere. Then gradually Rick's frown disappeared and a slow grin broke across his face. Because he suddenly got the picture, saw what the Darnells and Hager were each trying to do. Trying to out-sit each other.

Les and Melva were deliberately plying

the fat ranger with whiskey and talking nonsense, stringing words together while the other homesteaders drove their beef herd up through Bobcat Gorge and scattered them in the forest. It was a desperate, last ditch gamble, but the homesteaders were taking it because they had to have feed for their stock. No doubt they hoped to gain time to try and wangle higher authority than Hager's to get their herd admitted legally.

Hutch Hager was just cagey enough, had just sufficient *sabe* in his liquor-fogged brain to let the Darnells sit here, adding his two bits to talk about nothing. He'd drink the hog's share of that bottle of good whiskey while Abner Stromso and the K. C. riders played gun-havoc with the homesteaders trapped in a brush-choked gorge.

The Darnells didn't know it, but Hager had the edge in that kind of waiting game. When they found out, it would be too late.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Ranger Talks

HUTCH HAGER was sprawled in his rocker, shirt hanging open to reveal the flabby chest and soft belly. He was pouring another drink as Rick Carlin walked into the cabin.

Hager jerked, spilling liquor onto the floor, and the Darnells sprang from their chairs. Les heaved up the scattergun.

Rick wore a crooked grin. "Pour me a drink, somebody," he said. "Before Hager slops it all on the floor."

Les Darnell frowned and kept his grip on the shotgun. "We were getting along fine before you showed up, Rick."

Melva was staring, and there was a perplexed look on her small face. "There's cobwebs and straw all over you, Rick. And blood matting your hair. And your gun holster is as empty as Les's steerhide wallet."

Rick's grin widened as he walked past the muzzle of Les's shotgun and plucked the bottle from Hager's loose fingers. He cocked an eye at Melva. "I think maybe you still love me, after all," he said, and then took a long drink.

The girl shook her head, but her eyes never left him. "I was just noticing how much you look like a badger that's just

crawled from its hole. And maybe bumped its head on a rock."

Rick set the bottle back on the table. He walked over and picked a crooked piece of stovewood from the box beside the stove.

"That ugly hoptoad of a ranger hit me with this," he told them. "After Ab Stromso tied me in that chair you've been sitting in, Melva. Then Hager slung me in the back room, which is even dirtier than this one." He balanced the chunk of wood on one palm and squinted at Les. "How long," he inquired, "will it take Jared Haynes and the rest to run those steers up Bobcat Gorge to the government fence?"

Les Darnell forgot the shotgun, let the stock drop to the floor. He leaned it against the table. His eyes were boring at Rick.

"So you were sneakin' in the brush, spying on us! By hell—"

"Shut up for once, Les," Melva cut in. The girl's eyes were narrowed thoughtfully. "It would take them four hours, Rick. Maybe more, all told. Which means there's maybe an hour to go yet."

Rick nodded and swung around to look at Hutch Hager. He still wore the crooked grin, but his eyes were hard and cold. "Then we got time," he said, "to make this whiskey baritone sing."

Hager, already beginning to shake at the thought of what he'd have to take from Stromso for allowing Carlin to escape, now guessed Rick's purpose. The ranger let out a bellowing roar and threw himself out of the rocker, lunging across the table. His thick fingers closed on the steel barrel of the shotgun just as the table legs gave way.

Table, gun and Hutch Hager's mountainous body crashed to the floor. A seat like the bulging stern of a walrus reared over the wreckage. Rick Carlin gave one barking laugh. "Just the right position for an ugly fat toad to sing in!" he grunted, stepping forward to plant one boot on the ranger's wrist. He wrenched the gun free and chocked the butt down firmly against the back of Hager's red neck.

"Sing," Rick commanded grimly. "Sing pretty and sweet. Me and the Darnells will listen."

A CHOKED moan oozed from the wreckage and the huge body quivered. "Gawdamighty, Carlin, I can't even breathe in this position. Besides, I don't

know nothin'. Git Splinter Dawes. Git Baldy or somebody. I'm just a hired hand."

"You know the set-up," Rick growled. He raised the butt of the gun a few inches and let it drop against the base of Hager's skull. Hager groaned.

"I'll talk," he whimpered, his whiskey voice going high with fear. "Only for God's sake let me up. And don't mash in the back of my head. Oh, Lordy, my wrist is broke!"

A grin of dawning understanding swept Les Darnell's tan features as he watched the fat ranger crawl to his feet and flop into the rocker with a hollow, ludicrous groan. Les looked at Melva.

"I reckon we can wait, huh, Sis?"

Melva swung two chairs around. "And while we're waiting, we might's well have a pair of ringside seats. Get on, Rick."

Rick Carlin nodded, almost absently. He took a pair of leather gloves from his pocket and with one swoop of a long arm brought them raking down across Hager's face. The ranger yelped like a kicked cur dog and blood trickled from his nose.

"Now, mister, tell us all you know about Stromso's deal with the K. C. Beef Company. Every last dam' little thing!"

Hager's muddy eyes showed his craven streak. He wiped the blood from his upper lip and groaned. And then he let them have a stick of verbal dynamite. "In the first place, there ain't any K. C. Beef Company!"

"What in the good hell do you mean?" Rick said. "Most everybody's heard of the outfit that keeps addin' to their holdings by buying up mortgages, the same way they got the Double-O. Even though this is the first time they ever operated in this state."

Hager shook his head. "Stromso just traded on the name of that company. He didn't even use their name, exactly, which is the K. C. Range Beef Company."

Melva Darnell leaned forward while Les cussed under his breath. "Then Ab Stromso really held onto our mortgage himself, under the bogus company name?"

Hager dabbed at his nose and blinked. "Yep, but he couldn't foreclose, *because Utah Darnell paid up that mortgage in cash the day he died!*"

While Les let out a long whistle of amazement, Melva uttered a half-sob of thankfulness. But Rick Carlin hunched forward and grabbed the front of Hager's loose shirt. He twisted it until the cloth began to tighten on the flabby neck, then jammed his face down within a foot of Hagers.

"All right," he snarled. "Now tell us how Utah died!"

The ranger whimpered. "That accident of his was just a lucky break for Stromso . . ."

"You're lying!" Rick twisted the shirt tighter. Hager was sweating profusely. "Spill it," Rick ordered grimly, "or, so help me, I'll choke the yellow liver right out of



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your damned body! How'd Utah die?"

Hutch Hager's voice rose to a scream. "He was murdered, that's how! Stromso paid Splinter Dawes and Baldy Macklin to do the job, after he'd doped Utah's likker in town. Baldy rode alongside the buckboard and cracked Utah on the head with his gun, then they grabbed the lines and yanked the team off the road. The wagon went over the rim, pitchin' Utah over and draggin' one horse to the bottom. Ab killed the ranger here himself. Poisoned him with arsenic so he could get me in here to carry out his orders. He's loosed for power; wants to control the whole range. Once a feller like him gets started they don't know where to stop."

Rick Carlin turned slowly to face the Darnells. Their faces were white and Melva's brown eyes were wide and staring over her raised hands.

"Hager's right in that last statement," he told them. "A man like Stromso *has* to be stopped. And that's the chore we got to tackle right now, before he adds more murders to the list."

Melva's hand came out slowly to touch Rick's sleeve. "Rick, I— We—"

Les interrupted. "Sis is tryin' to say that we— That is that her and I—Aw, hell, Rick! Why didn't you tromp a bit more *sabe* into me when you had me down this morning?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Bullets for Killers

DOWN in the twisting depths of Bobcat Gorge, white-faced steers were strung out along the bottom in a long straggling line. At the west end the herd fanned out against the wire fence that cut straight across the gorge. At the rear came the gaunt figure of old Jared Haynes, with about a dozen other homesteaders.

Rick Carlin, Les and Melva sat their horses far back on a timbered ridge. A mile of rough, tangled country lay between them and the homesteaders.

"Are you sure Hutch Hager can't get out of that back room?" Melva asked.

"He'll sure never squeeze through the window like Rick did," Les answered with a chuckle. Rick Carlin grinned.

"Accidentally on purpose, like, I forgot

to lock the door to that back room. Soon's he gets up guts enough to try it, he can walk right out. An' his horse is in the corral. Somehow I got the feelin' Hutch Hager won't be seen again around these parts. Shame, too, because they'll have to send out a new ranger."

Les Darnell's eyes had gone somber as he stared into the gulch. Now a sound, like a growl, came out of his throat. "There's where the bushwhackin' sons are holed up—yonder where that big nest of granite pinches the gorge together."

"We're in time," Melva said, and there was a note of wild hope in her tone. "They haven't cut the fence yet!"

Her voice choked off and Rick Carlin felt like a mule had kicked him in the stomach. "An hombre's cutting it now. Stromso let him go by, but he'll open up when the drag of the herd gets to the narrows."

"We'll never get to Haynes in time," Les muttered. "What'll we do?"

Rick shook his head and gripped the scattergun, the only weapon he'd been able to find at Hager's shack. He had his pockets crammed with shells, and the shells were marked "Buckshot."

"We can't risk rousin' Stromso's crew; they'd cut loose from there and maybe kill half a dozen men before the homesteaders could get back out of reach. Me and you got to sneak down one of these gullies, Les. Tackle Stromso from behind."

Les brightened. "Two of us against five killers, and surprise in our favor. It's better'n I hoped for. Sis can stay here . . ."

"Sis can darn well ride with you," Melva said flatly. "I've shot rattlers before with my .38 Colts, and it'll make the odds three to five."

Yet by the time the three had worked their way through a brushy gully, left their horses and crept up to within a couple hundred feet of the ambush, it looked as if Melva's arithmetic was on the wrong side of the ledger. Because the five gunmen were already sprawled atop the big boulders with their rifles leveled into the gulch below! And down through a notch in the brush Rick could make out the homesteaders. They were almost to the spot where Stromso would surely give the order to mow them down.

Rick grunted to the horror-stricken Melva and Les, "We got to flash those

hombres out like a flock of mountain quail."

Up at the fence the last wire had been cut and about twenty steers had already ambled through into the Piney. The rest of the herd, smelling the good grass just ahead, were bawling.

Rick stood up. Melya, divining his purpose, reached out a hand to grab his arm. But Rick grinned and shook her off. He walked out into plain sight and raised his shotgun, aiming at Abner Stromso's thin body back there on the rocks. But even then he couldn't bring himself to shoot a man in the back. Sweat coming out on his forehead and cursing at his own stubborn scruples, Rick opened his mouth and yelled.

"Jared Haynes, you're ridin' into a death trap! Drop back, *pronto!* Hit for cover, you bushwhackers, or take a double load of buckshot!"

Like prairie dogs ducking for their holes Stromso and his men slid and tumbled down behind the rocks, knocking over one another in their efforts to get out of sight.

Rick waved his arms in frantic signals to the homesteaders, who had yanked their mounts to a halt in startled surprise. A second later they wheeled their mounts, but at the same instant Stromso roared a hoarse order and rifles blared from hidden recesses. A bullet smacked a rock beside Rick and whined up the hill. Chunks of the granite flew out like broken glass and laced across the back of Rick's hand, numbing it mo-

mentarily and bringing the bright blood.

In the gulch one of the homesteaders pitched off his horse, but staggered erect and lurched off into the brush to one side. Jared Haynes and the others yanked their horses up a small draw out of sight.

"You're the ones that's trapped now, Stromso," Rick Carlin yelled.

ABNER STROMSO'S bawling voice lifted. "Damn you, Carlin, you're interferin' with a legal chore. Hager depitized us to stop these fool cowmen from bustin' onto government property"

Rick laughed, and shouted back. "Never mind tryin' to keep up the farce, Stromso. Hutch Hager told me and the Darnells all about your faked K. C. Company and the murders you already done. You only got one chore now, and that's to fight for your life. You and those killers with you!"

Now Jared Haynes' voice raised from the little draw. "I'm getting the picture, Carlin, though it's a might fogged in detail! I *sabe* we come nigh riding to our deaths, and you snaked us out by the skin of our teeth. If Ab Stromso and some others is up in them granite boulders, looks like we got 'em in a hole. They better give up!"

"Give up, hell!" roared he rasping voice of Baldy Macklin. "We'll fight 'er out right here: Come on, you sons, give us somethin' to peg lead at!"

Now from up by the fence another voice



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chimed in. It was the puncher who had cut the fence. He had crawled up on a ledge at the head of the gorge.

"I can see 'em crouchin' there like rats, Carlin!" the puncher shouted, and in the same breath he began triggering his six-gun. A rifle barked in return, and the puncher let out a hoarse cry and fell. He pitched off the ledge and disappeared. Melva Darnell uttered a little scream.

"Les! That was Johnny Haynes, Jared's son."

Les nodded grimly. "I know. And I can't see a damned one of them murderin' rascals."

"Hell," Rick said suddenly. "I'm for bustin' up the party."

At a crouching run he went over the rocks and brush, cradling the shotgun in his arms. Bullets came at him, whamming the rocks loudly. But he was a weaving, hard-to-hit target and the distance lessened rapidly. Then a chunk of lead slapped hard against his left shoulder and almost immediately another raked hot claws through his right thigh. He staggered, lurched—and raced on, bringing the gun around, hugging the butt close and pointing the muzzle at the rocks ahead.

A gray hat showed for an instant and Rick pressed the right hand trigger. There was a ghastly scream and Shard Bolbo rose from his cranny, then dropped back suddenly.

Rifles and sixguns were barking from across the gulch, where Jared Haynes and his men had wormed their way to places of vantage. And behind Rick came a long-drawn wild Indian yell—the warcry Les Darnell and Rick had used years ago while playing Injun massacre on the school-grounds at Carmody.

"I'm right behind you, pard!" Les yelled, and his sixgun punctuated his cry.

In the haze of gunsmoke raising out of that nest of granite rocks, the gangling figure of Ab Stromso now rose like a demon out of the pits of hell. His thin ace was twisted, the crooked mouth warped to one side and the small eyes blazing with insane, thwarted rage. The rifle he held jerked up.

But before Ab Stromso could pull the trigger, Rick Carlin's scattergun blared again. Fire swept from the left barrel. Stromso straightened, dropped his gun and

flung his arms together in a violent hugging motion. His features were pasty white, but the blood from his ripped jugular spurted out over arms, hands and chest as the tall man fell forward. He was dead when he hit the rocks.

Then Rick Carlin's shot-up leg collapsed under him and he took a fall. The shotgun flew out of his hands and he cursed wildly as it slid over a little ledge where he couldn't get it. His leg pained and his shoulder pained. His right hand was swollen and bleeding from the rock fragments. The flaring ache had returned to his battered head. He heard the shooting and the yelling around him and then the next thing he knew he was stretched out on the ground and his head somehow was on Melva Darnell's lap.

THE girl was alternately laughing and crying. "Thank God, you're alive, darling! For a while I didn't know, when you passed out cold from all the shooting and beating you've had today."

"I knew he was too ornery to die so easy," Les Darnell said, and Rick saw with considerable surprise that most of the homesteaders were clustered around him.

"Stromso and the others, all dead as butchered steers," Jared Haynes answered his unspoken question.

"Your son," Rick managed then. "I'm sorry I messed things up so. Should have worked it different. . . ."

Jared Haynes grinned. "No apologies asked or accepted, son. My boy's settin' down yonder in the gulch now—him and the homesteader that was hit. Ain't neither one of 'em as bad off as you. And I'm here to state we got three hundred head of good steers stuffin' their bellies on government grass right now. All we got to worry about is how to make it right with any new ranger they send out to take Hutch Hager's place."

"Set your mind at rest there, amigo," Les said, and there was a proud ring in his voice. "As legal owners of the Double-O, the Darnells had ought to throw weight enough to straighten out a little matter like that. Right—brother?"

"He means you, Rick," Melva whispered. "Get it, darling?" Rick squeezed her hand and allowed he did.

THE END

He saw her bow
deep in the sand.



By Roy
Vandergoot

Secret of the Desert

Do ancient ghost ships, foundered dim centuries back in bloody quest of fabled plunder, still ride in unfathomed mystery the secret lost lakes of the Colorado desert?

IT'S hard to tell who saw it first—maybe some old-time Mexican prospector, or maybe one of the proud *conquistadores* in his coat of armor, hopelessly lost in the sandy wastes. But since then many a prospector has come out of the sun-scorched reaches of the Colorado Desert swearing he has seen it with his very own eyes, her bow deeply buried in the sand, her ornately carved stern high above, her ribs scoured and pitted by terrific sandstorms—gaunt and grim, bleached by the pitiless sun, her frame like the huge-boned skeleton of some pre-historic monster; her mizzen mast broken, hanging lop-sided over the poop. . . .

Is there really some ancient sailing craft lying half-buried in the sands of the Colorado Desert in Southern California? Or are these just tales, wild yarns spun by sun-looed desert rats stumbling half dead into camp? Let us examine the evidence:

First of all, there is the ancient beach line visible on the mountain sides all the way from the Gulf of California to some distance above Indio, the main town in the Coachella Valley, 85 miles from the Mexican border as the crow flies—indisputable proof that once the Gulf ran far inland.

How long ago? No one knows for certain, but it was surely many hundreds of years before the *conquistadores* came to ravage the land of Montezuma. Once the sea was there, and the premise has been advanced that the fabled craft was one of King Solomon's treasure ships, the ships that carried home to him the gold from the mines of Ophir. And it never has been discovered in what far land these mines were located. The ship might have become lost, driven by storms far off its course; and then again, maybe the course wasn't so far off—there might have been mutiny in Solomon's

crews! The theory has even been forwarded that the vessel might have come from the sunken land of Mu which in the hoary long-ago disappeared from sight in the Pacific somewhere south of Hawaii; or that it might have been a stray from ancient Asia. *Quién sabe?*

Is it merely a mirage? Perhaps. But listen to what one old prospector had to say about that:

"Mirage? Hell, no! Me an' Shorty McGaffer seen her plain as all git out. One day three years ago come August we was foolin' around near the Cocopahs an' it was so danged hot the sand would have scorched the devil's tail tuft had he dragged it. Then we seen her, stickin' her three-decked stern outa the sand like Shorty's hind-end outa his old overhalls. It was too danged hot to walk it—five-six miles or more, and the burro was plumb tuckered out—so we decided we'd lay over f'r the night an' git us a right early start the next mornin'. But so help me, that night it starts blowin' so hard we had to moor the burro to a boulder to keep her from bein' blown clear into *mañana* land, an' the next day that blasted ship was gone, plumb buried in the sand again. Mebbe you won't see her again f'r ten, twenty, or mebbe fifty years when another snorter blows her clear again."

Fantastic? Brother, if you've ever lived through a Colorado Desert sandstorm, you wouldn't think so.

Then there was Charley Clusker who, through Indians he had befriended, received clues as to the whereabouts of the treasure ship. The Indians in the Colorado Desert have legends about the ship, and behind all legends usually lurks the ghost of fact. So Charley tried to find it. In November 1870, he set out. But the desert proved too tough a proposition and, after nearly perishing from thirst, Chuck gave it up for a bad job. Still, he claimed that he had spotted the remains of some timbers protruding from the sand when he was forced to return to camp for lack of water.

IN 1774, a Mexican boy by the name of Manquerna, employed by Juan Bautista de Anza on the exploring trip from Sonora to San Diego, got lost in the desert. Traveling at night to avoid the daytime's searing heat, the boy stumbled upon the wreck of an ancient ship. Half delirious when many

days later he stumbled into Mission San Luis Rey, he had in his pockets some remarkably large and beautiful pearls. Later, he spent years trying to find the spot again.

In 1615 a boat from Mazatlán, under the command of Juan de Iturbe and Nicolas Cardona, went on a trading and pearl-diving expedition up the Gulf of California. Legend has it that they went up the Colorado River as far as the Salton Sea, in which desert sink the rampaging river had once again carved its course. A cloudburst occurred when they were on the Salton Sea, scouring the desert and depositing enormous quantities of materials across the channel by which they had entered, blocking their retreat and forcing the River into a different channel.

When the Gulf's incoming tide encounters the River's flow, a battle of titans takes place, a tidal wave—or "bore," as it is called—resulting. It is a steep-walled wave that in springtime, when the Colorado is in flood, may reach a maximum height of well over thirty feet. When unusual tidal conditions prevail, it may even go higher.

In the early '60s Captain Jack A. Mellen, one of the most expert Colorado River pilots, had his three-masted sailing vessel wrecked in the great tidal bore. It is only reasonable to assume that other vessels in the long-ago were similarly caught and wrecked.

There are many places here where the desert is below sea level, and when extreme tidal conditions battle spring floods, the River often cuts through the restraining grounds to flood these places, leaving enormous bodies of water which later on slowly evaporate to leave the so-called dry-lakes. The Salton Sink is one of them. It was flooded the last time in 1905, when the raging River tore out the entry gate of the Imperial Ditch, the great canal that supplies irrigation water to the far-famed Imperial Valley. It was not until 1907 that the River was muzzled and the break repaired. The Salton Sea is now again in the slow process of drying up.

The *Laguna Salada* is another such spot often in the past filled by the River. In the '70s, when a sulphur mine was found in this district, the explorers found that the Cocopah Indians here had built some of their teepees from heavy planking. Where did they get those planks? Did an ancient ves-

sel venture far up the River to be swept into the break by the raging waters to be left imprisoned in the pond? None of the old-timers seem to know.

When the first navigator-explorers came to scan California's shores, seeking the fabled Straights of Anian, the rumored passage from the Pacific to the Atlantic, some of these undoubtedly sailed up the Gulf. How many of these ventured up the Colorado must remain forever a mystery, but likely some of them did. And from the records we learn that many a ship in those waters vanished without a clue to hull or crew. . .

In 1587 the Englishman Thomas Cavendish, commanding the *Desire* and the *Content* (revealing names!), tackled the Spanish galleon *Santa Ana* and seized her. Besides precious merchandise from China, 22,000 "pezos of golde" were taken from the Spaniard. The spoils were divided between the two ships and sail was set for home. But strange things were in store for the ships.

The *Content*, a vessel of only 60 tons, was left astern of the *Desire* and soon lost sight of. Nothing was ever heard of the *Content* again. Did the crew mutiny, and did they sail up the Gulf and up the River? Or did the captain seek a short-cut to the Atlantic via the Colorado? And did the raging River wreck and swallow the vessel

to later on spew her forth in some newly formed desert lake?

Quién sabe? But the Cocopah Indians have a tribal legend of a great ship coming up from the Gulf and being wrecked by the River.

In 1857, Lieutenant Joseph C. Ives, U. S. A., commanded the steamer *Explorer* for a survey of the Colorado River. After Ives' work was done the *Explorer* was used freighting for a number of years. She became quickly obsolete and was replaced by a more modern vessel. Tied up at a tree on the bank, she was forgotten by man—but not by the River. One spring night when the great stream went on an April spree, the tree was uprooted and floated downstream, taking the *Explorer* along with it.

Again the rampaging river changed its course as she had done so often before. The *Explorer* simply disappeared. Nobody knows where.

In 1930, a party of surveyors, trudging up one of the River's long-abandoned channels, stumbled upon a heap of rusting plates. Yep, it was the wreck of the old *Explorer*, high and dry and miles away from the nearest water.

Are there wrecks of ancient ships concealed in the sands of the Colorado Desert? Ask some old desert rat. He'll tell you, all right!



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Bill snaked the man's gun and hurtled him into the fire.

S. O. S. in Gun- smoke!



Those horsehairs meant one thing to Bill Bowlder—a signal for help from the Texas girl he loved! But Bill was set for a quick straightening out—both permanent and horizontal!

By
Miles
Overholt

BILL BOWLDER was unsaddling his Bonehead bronc at the corral when he saw a strange rider halt at his mail box a thousand yards distant and deposit something in it.

"And a good thing, too," Bill said to his saddle. "Danged if I've peeked into that letter file for six months, come St. Swith-

in's Day—whenever the heck that may be!"

So before turning Bonehead out to pasture, he climbed aboard him without a riding plaster and loped over to the main road.

He found six mail order catalogues, three letters offering bargains in ranch goods, and the missive just deposited.

His name had been printed on the white envelope, which bore no stamp and so had not gone through the mail.

It contained half-a-dozen black hairs from the mane or tail of a horse, nothing more.

But nothing else was needed. Bill was a kind of a horsehair reader.

"Me, I'm hairyvoyant," he told Bonehead.

Back two years those horse hairs whirled his thoughts.

Two years ago he had left the 717 spread in Colorado, where he had been formanizing, to rush home to Texas to help his dad in his feud with Shootin' Sam Clayborn. He arrived too late. Shootin' Sam had killed Lafe Bowlder when they met in Yampa Town a day or so after Lafe had written his son to come home.

The feud started, Bill had learned, over a black stallion which Lafe had captured in the hills after a week's chase.

Shootin' Sam claimed he had first caught the wild horse and showed Lafe the rope burns on the beautiful animal's arched neck, but he couldn't sell Lafe on the logical idea.

Lafe chased the neighbor off the place, one of his bullets having only one of Shootin' Sam's initials on it, apparently, for it only gouged his ribs.

After that, though, the two oldsters managed to shoot at each other every time they came within range, until Shootin' Sam stole up to the BB pasture and killed the horse.

At least, Lafe was sure his enemy had shot the stallion; nobody else in Texas was vicious enough to do such a thing, he told himself.

So he rode over to Shootin' Sam's S-Bar-S and, finding no human there to shoot at, killed Shootin' Sam's recently-accumulated Jersey bull.

That brought into the picture Danglin' Dave Clayborn, the elder son of Shootin' Sam, who sent a dozen bullets through the window of the BB ranch house, one of them smashing the arm of the cook, Baldy Bamster.

Baldy's shadow could be seen at Lafe's desk and Danglin' Dave thought he was the cowman, whereas Baldy was only looking for Lafe's bottle of tiger bite cure.

It taunted him a lesson, too, for he always did believe Lafe had shot him.

Danglin' Dave thought he had killed Lafe Bowlder, and his old man suggested that he leave the country for a spell, so he headed north, working at different spreads.

Every little while he would become frightened at what he thought was a sheriff's shadow, and would move on a county or two.

He was still moving northward at the time Bill received his father's letter urging him to come back to Texas and help him take the Clayborn outfit apart and throw the pieces into something deep and dismal.

Now, during the long winter in whose chilly lap spring was dawdling, Bill Bowlder had fashioned a hair bridle—being, as he said, "hairyvoyant"—which he had presented to Mary Elizabeth Rathbone, 19.

Mary Elizabeth was the daughter of Bill's boss, and all the cowhands killing time on the 717 were in the same category as the foreman—bogged down clear up to their eyes in love with the blonde Venus.

Nobody paid any attention to Wilhelmina, Mary Elizabeth's kid sister, who was all legs and freckles, so she didn't get any hair bridle. All Wilhelmina—called Bill for short—ever got was in the way.

So when Bill Bowlder received the hurry-up call to come home and kill somebody quick, he thought of a very romantic gag indeed.

"You never can tell," he told Mary Elizabeth, "because things happen, and you might even reach a point where you need help. Maybe a dragon or something will come along and you'll want it slain."

"You can't kill dragons out of season," Mary Elizabeth reminded him.

"You can if there is a damsel in distress—I read it in Sears-Sawbuck's catalogue," Bill argued. "So, tell you what. If anything comes along thataway that needs killing, you bear me in mind, savvy?"

"You mean—get somebody to kill you?"

"No! Get me to kill somebody. You don't need to write, because maybe you won't be able to—afraid somebody'll open the letter or something—it pretty nearly always happens thataway—"

"Who'd open the letter?" Mary Elizabeth wanted to know.

"Shucks, how do I know?" Bill growled.

"Let me tell it, will you? So what you do—if you need me sudden—why, send a few

hairs out that there bridle I built all on a winter's day."

"You've been working on it since last November," the girl reminded.

"I was speaking poetical," Bill said. "Anyway, you savvy now—send a few hairs of that bridle and I'll know you need help and I'll come so fast it'll make a fish's head swim."

THAT was two years ago—and now Bill had opened an envelope containing a few black horse hairs.

He rode back to the corral, turned Bone-head out to graze and went into the house, packed some possibles and called Hank Acker to come up from the bunkhouse.

"I just got a kind of message," he told his segundo, "and I have to take me a trip in a hurry, sort of. Reckon you can run this layout till I can get back?"

"Shore," Hank said, "if'n yuh don't stay more'n 'leven-twelve years. Do yuh want me t' kill Shootin' Sam Clayborn or any of that lousy outfit? I hear tell they're gettin' kinda promiscuous."

"What they doing now?"

"Sendin' warnin's t' small-fry ranchers t' git out, then if'n they don't git, they kill 'em or burn 'em out or steal 'em blind, or all three."

"I reckon Shootin' Sam'll keep till I get back," Bill said. "Chase me in my noble steed Step'n-a-half, will you? I'll get going tonight."

So Bill got going, riding all night and part of the next day before taking a rest. For the more he thought about it, the more certain he was that Mary Elizabeth was badly in need of his help.

The Rathbone girls had been motherless for seven years and someone may have killed old Ed Rathbone, or he might have died a natural death, leaving the spread to Mary Elizabeth to run. Rustlers might have moved in. Any number of dire things might have happened. Bill was deeply worried. So many disasters could have assailed the girl of his dreams.

It took the lovelorn cowhand eight days to reach Grant County, and not until he arrived at the little cowtown of Hayden did he learn that Ed Rathbone had died. Now he figured he knew for certain why Mary Elizabeth needed him.

Somebody was trying to steal the ranch!

At Palos he ran across Webb Craft in the Roundup where he had gone to dampen his tongue and see what he could hear. Webb used to work for the 717.

"Things ain't goin' so good at th' 717 since Ed Rathbone died over a year ago," the cow-wrassler said.

"What's happened?" Bill asked.

"I ain't been out thar, but I hear they's a bunch o' Texicans takin' over th' outfit an' turnin' it int' a kinda way-station fer stole cattle," Webb said. "They run 'em t' th' 717 an' change th' brands into a Double-Box, which is only runnin' th' ol' 717 into a Double-Box—coupla scratches of a runnin' iron at th' top an' bottom will do it."

The dogie-dumper wanted to drag Bill into the poker game that was just starting, but the Texas hand was too worried over the 717 to set his mind on anything like cards.

It was late and his bronc was frazzled, so Bill stayed at the Palos House that night, and planned to get up early and ride out to the 717 before sun-up.

But he heard more bad news before he reached the ranch when a rider came tearing down the trail leading from the 717 just before he reached the main fence. The hard-ridden pony skidded to a halt at Bill's side as the reckless rider recognized him.

"As I live and have fits if it isn't Bill Boulder!" cried Wilhelmina Rathbone, now all grown-up and prettier, even, than Mary Elizabeth.

"Doggoned if it isn't the Pest herself!" ejaculated Bill Boulder, taken aback at the beauty of the youngster. "Where you heading for so siltmultaneous?" he demanded, shaking her outstretched hand.

Wilhelmina sobered, the grin leaving her face, not much freckled now.

"Sheriff," she said. "I got to get help, Bill. Things are getting out of hand. I made a sneak on Dave and his pals while they were rebranding some stolen cattle over yonder in The Gash and I want to drag old Sime Culver out there before they finish."

"Tell me more, Bill," urged the Texas man. "Maybe we ought to go into this with circumspection and dispassionately."

"Where did you get the big words?" the girl wondered. "But they might finish the branding and cover up if I don't get Sime

out there pronto and previous," she giggled, trying to match his language.

"There'll be other times, probably," he argued; "Unravel me some information, huh?" The girl swallowed and nodded.

"Ever since Mary Elizabeth got married—"

"Huh? What? Married? Mary Elizabeth?" It was the cowhand who was excited now.

"Yeh: didn't you know? Gosh!" Wilhelmina said, "I'm sorry, Bill."

"Who—what jigger—who's the guy?"

"His name," the girl said, "is Dave Clayborn from Texas."

At which Bill Bowlder practically swallowed his tonsils.

"Danglin' Dave Clayborn! My gosh! They—does Mary Elizabeth—uh—but, of course, she does," he floundered.

The girl grinned. "Does what—love him? Heck, no! She despises him, and so do I," she said.

"But she married him," Bill pointed out.

"Yes—she—married—him," Wilhelmina admitted. "But, Dad had just died—you heard about that?—and I guess she was lonely and the new foreman swept her off her feet, kinda, I guess. He is sorta handsome, in a despicable sort of way."

"And what's he doing now—trying to steal the outfit?"

THE girl nodded quickly. "Something like that. Anyway, he fired all the old hands and brought in a crew of his own—from Texas. They steal cattle all over and chouse 'em into the brakes back of the ranch, rebrand them with a kinda smeary brand—Dave calls it the Double-Box—and everybody thinks the 717 is nothing but a rustler spread."

"Which, of course, it dang well is," the cowhand said.

"Which it dang well is," said the girl.

"Tell you what," Bill said then. "You lay off the sheriff for a day or two—you sure Mary Elizabeth doesn't—uh—love Dave?"

"Sure I'm sure. She tells me so all the time."

"Well, let me mess around for a few days till I can get the real goods on Danglin' Dave. You know Mary Elizabeth sent for me?"

"She did? Why, that's funny. She

didn't tell me about it. She seems to be sort of ashamed about marrying Dave and hoped you wouldn't find it out."

"It was a kind of secret message, sort of," Bill said. "I told her if she ever needed me to send some hairs out of that bridle I made for her—remember? Well, she sent them in a plain envelope. Some strange cowhand left the envelope in my mail box, and I hustled right up here."

"But that bridle—" She didn't finish, and Bill failed to notice that she was about to divulge something over which she was now biting her tongue. What she had started to say was that bridle had been stolen more than a year ago, but thought better of it.

They rode to the ranchyard together, but Mary Elizabeth didn't see them, which was what Bill most desired.

Wilhelmina rustled him some grub from the cockshack, and Bill kept out of sight. He didn't want anybody to know he was on the spread.

Bill knew The Gash country as well as anybody, so he rode over in that direction about an hour later, keeping pretty much in the shrubbery. And that was where Loop McGill snagged him off his horse.

Loop had spied him twenty minutes before as he was making his way along a game trail, and had ridden ahead of him and laid in wait for him. An accurate toss of his twine had pinned Bill's hands down and he was jerked out of the saddle.

"Well, look what papa caught all by himself!" chortled Dave Clayborn's segundo. "If it ain't Bill Bowlder I'll be my uncle's nevvyy! Now, what is that jigger doin' here?"

Bill couldn't answer, because he had been knocked unconscious when his head struck a boulder in the trail. Loop threw him into his saddle and carried him to the temporary camp in The Gash.

When he recovered consciousness, Bill found Danglin' Dave Clayborn and six of his rustlers were sitting around a fire having some chow, but Bill suppressed the groan he felt was coming to him, clamped his eyelids down and opened his ears a couple of notches.

He heard Dave say:

"He used t' be sweet on m' wife, but dang'd if I know what he's doin' hyar. My ol' man killed his ol' man a coupla years

ago, after I failed t' do th' chore. Come of a feud over a wild hoss."

"That hoss shore started somethin'," Goob Magruder said. Goob was another of Shootin' Sam Clayborn's tough hands. It looked as though most of the S-Bar-S crew was working for Dave.

"Shore did," Dave laughed. "It give th' ol' man an idear—t' send t' th' next gent he figgered t' salivate a few hairs outen th' hoss' tail to 'em, meanin' they better git out or git theirselves bashed. So what I figger is, th' ol' man decided t' take over th' BB an' sent some of them hairs t' Bill thar an' he high-tailed it. That's how brave Bill Bowlder is."

"Whatcha goin' t' do with him, Dave?" someone asked then.

Danglin' Dave chuckled.

"Wal, if'n my ol' man was figgerin' on takin' over th' BB, I reckon mebbe we better give him a hand, eh?"

"Shore," said Loop McGill. "Then if'n yore ol' man don't want it, we kin use th' spread. Want me t' beef him now?"

"Naw, not yit," Dave said. "I ain't had no fun fer a week. I aim t' let him know whar he stands fust, then slip a few cactus thorns under his fingernails for luck. Yuh git his gun, Loop?"

"Shore, I frisked him proper."

"Th'ow some water on his ugly mug, Goob," Dave ordered.

BILL opened his eyes a tiny bit. Goob Magruder was bending over him with a pail. Now was the time or never. So—Bill grabbed his legs and twisted, throwing the tough hand on top of him. So fast was the unexpected move that the others sat with their mouths open as Bill snaked the struggling man's gun from its holster and hurtled Magruder over into the hot coals of the cooking fire.

Magruder screeched, and Dave Clayborn grabbed for his gun. Bill shot him through the neck, just as Loop McGill unlimbered his gun. Bill sent a slug into the rustler's chest.

Silk Carmichael unloosed a bullet then, but Goob Magruder, rising up from the ashes, his clothing smoking, stepped right into the slug's pathway, taking the bullet in the head. Bill killed Silk before he could shoot again.

Slip Calkins fired twice, but both bullets

went wild, because he was witnessing too much excitement all at once, and Bill shot him as he was attempting to aim his gun for the third blast.

Joe Simms quit cold.

"Don't shoot!" he screeched at Bill, tossing away his gun. "I'm unarmed! See?"

Which was as good a time as any for Wilhelmina Rathbone to ride into the stormy scene. She had witnessed most of it, however, for she had been hiding there in the shrubbery for the past half-hour, rifle aimed at the six men, and ready to take a hand when Bill revived. Only Bill worked too fast for her.

"You hurt, you fightin' fool?" the girl wanted to know, rushing over to the reeling cowhand, who had a headache left over from his tumble out of the saddle that was big enough to go to school.

Tears were gushing out of the Pest's eyes and she was trying her best to operate a grin at the same time.

"Kind of woozy, is all," the cowhand said. "Got whammed on the cabeza. How's all your folks?" Then he collapsed.

Wilhelmina whirled, training her gun on the open-mouthed Joe Simms. "You stay put!" she ordered, and the tough hand sat down. The girl kept one eye on him as she spilled some water onto Bill's face, who sat up then and grinned at the Pest.

"You'll do to take along," he said.

"If you think I won't go, you're crazy," she responded impishly.

Bill trussed up Joe Simms. The others had called it a day.

"Now," the cowhand said, "would be a swell time to bring the sheriff pronto and previous."

"After I make you some coffee," the Pest insisted.

The lawman arrived with Wilhelmina three hours later. Sime Culver got the low-down and packed the bodies of the outlaws onto their horses, tied Simms into his saddle and started back to town.

"When you start to clean up on a gang of rustlers, you don't mess around, do you?" Wilhelmina said proudly, looking sidewise at Bill Bowlder, as they rode back toward the 717 ranch house.

"You know something," Bill said.

"Danged if you aren't kind of special."

"I aim to please," she said demurely.

It was no easy task to break the news to

Mary Elizabeth that she was a widow, but the two Bills managed to do it very well, and after the first shock she took it like a thoroughbred.

"I am sure now I never did love Dave," she said calmly enough. "And when I learned that he was nothing but a thief and robber and was turning the 717 into a rustler spread, then I hated him. Our home desecrated!"

"Uh—about that hair bridle—"

"Oh, Bill, I'm so sorry about that," Mary Elizabeth said. "Somebody stole it last year. I cried for two days. It was such a beautiful thing."

"Then you didn't—uh—you couldn't have—you didn't send me any hoss-tail hairs?"

"No, I—oh, I remember now! You told me to send some strands from that bridle if I ever needed you. I'd forgotten it."

"Hmm." So Danglin' Dave was right—it had been Shootin' Sam who had sent the death threat. He'd have to hurry back to Texas and take care of old Shootin' Sam. That chore had been long neglected.

"It might be kind of lonesome here for awhile," Bill said to Mary Elizabeth. "Beside's there's a lot of things that have to be straightened out. Your cattle will have to be rounded up and a check made. Stolen cows will have to be returned wherever they can be returned."

"Yes, I know. The 717 will have to start all over again," Mary Elizabeth said. "But you are going to stay—and take care of me—I mean, things!—are you not?" She smiled wistfully. The Pest turned to leave the room, but Bill stopped her.

"I've got to get back to the BB," he said. "The ranch has been kind of lonely lately and I've thought a lot about seeing if I could find me a real pal—one who'll do to take along—to sort of make ranching an interesting business."

MARY ELIZABETH'S lips parted. Her eyes smiled.

"But what about the 717?" she asked.

"Why, I was about to say I'll send my foreman up and he'll get it straightened out. Hank Acker is a good man. I can vouch for him. Youngish too, about your age, I'd say."

"Yes?"

"And so, The Pest there and I will be leaving for Texas—she's the little guy I need to help run the BB—she's the one who'll do to take along—if she'll go." He grinned at her.

There was a patter of feet, and The Pest's arms were wound about the cowhand's neck.

"Try to stop me, you big brute!" she said, kissing her man, whom she had idolized ever since she could remember anything at all.

A justice of the peace at Palos married them that very evening, the sheriff acting as best man.

The Pest rode her own pony alongside her brand new husband all the way to Texas, except where the trail was too narrow, but Bill didn't pick many narrow trails. Not with the Pest along.

Hank Acker met them at Yampa Town with news.

"Shootin' Sam is dead," he told his boss. "Sheriff killed him along with two-three other scoundrels. Seems they up an' shot a few nesters an' one thing after another against th' peace an' dignity o' th' State o' Texas. So th' law got on th' prod an' ended what might otherwise had bin some brilliant careers."

Bill introduced his shiny new wife, then told Hank to get ready to take over the 717 until it was on its feet. Hank Acker didn't mind.

"Heah's a letter Jap Logan done tol' me t' give yuh," he said, passing over the envelope. Bill read:

Dear Bill:

There's a gent here in Yampa looking for a certain grade of horse hair for making precision instruments, and he aksed me to get in touch with some of you fellows and see if you can supply quite a large amount. I meant to enclose this in a letter containing some samples, which I sent out with Bill Barlow a few days ago, but neglected to enclose it, so you have been wondering, I suppose, what it is all about—an envelope with a few horse-tail hairs in it! The drinks are on me. Come in and see me.

JAP LOGAN.

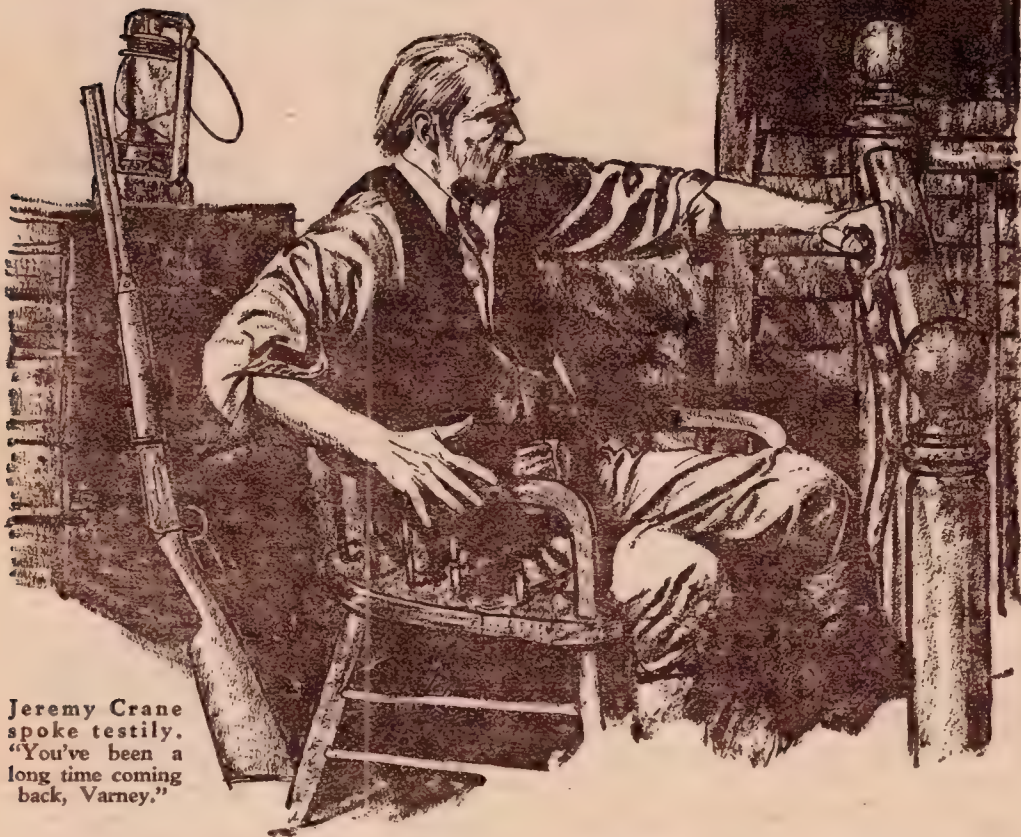
"Fate," said Bill Bowlder to his sparkling hand-picked wife, "works in a mysterious way its wonders to perform."

The Pest giggled. "You're telling me," she said.

• THE • TIMBERLINE TRAITOR

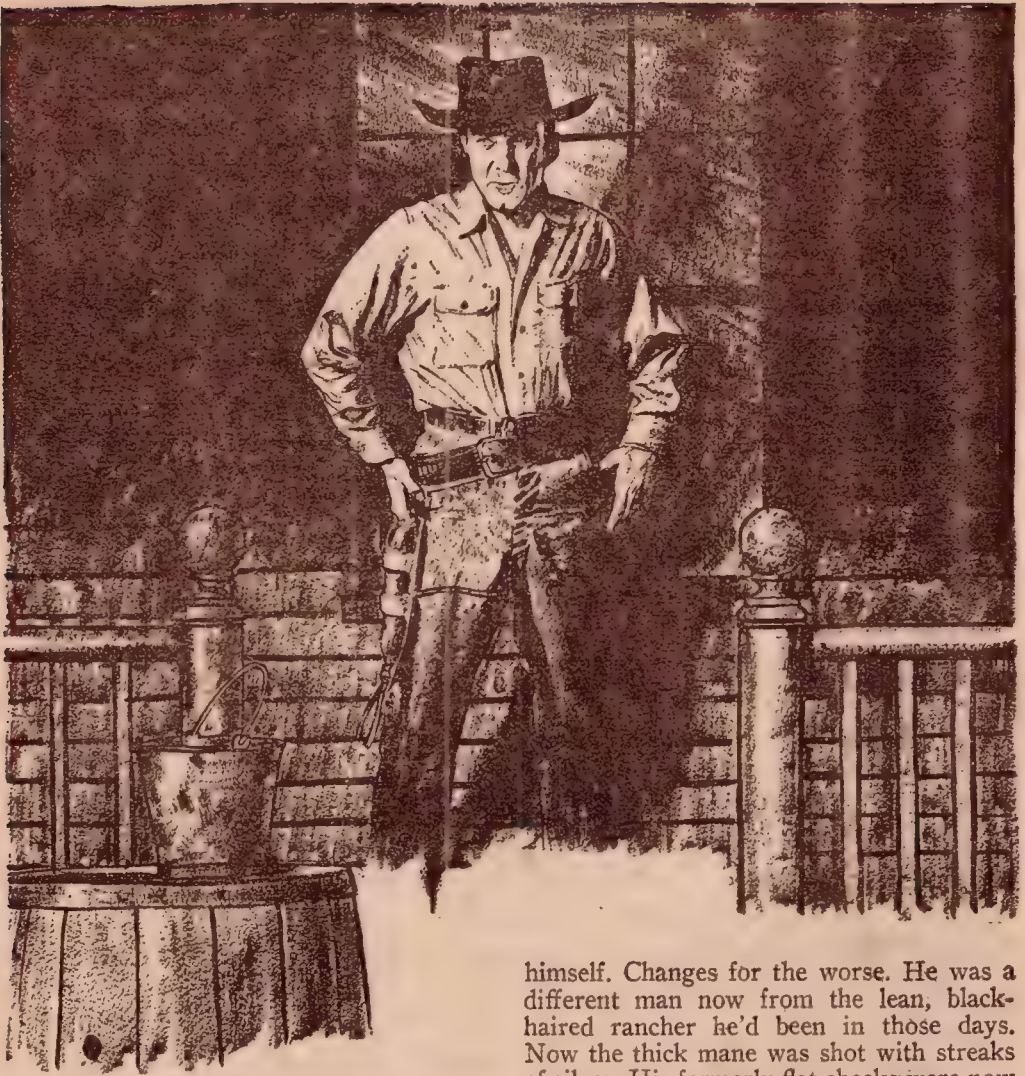
By Ed Earl Repp

Hard-Punching Novelette
of Cowman Vengeance
in the Tall Timber



Jeremy Crane
spoke testily.
"You've been a
long time coming
back, Varney."

Sided only by a jailbird—and the uneasy ghosts of long dead kinfolk—Reed Varney rode out of Yuma Prison to sign on with the double-cross legion of Spook Valley, in a quick-death logger-cowman war—against the only two people in the world that he could call friends!



CHAPTER ONE

Timberline Triggermen

A TOP the high, bald ridge two riders curbed their mounts for a brief smoke. Their gazes swept the rolling vista of cattle range and timber below them. In the gray, calculating eyes of Reed Varney, tallest of the pair, brooding regret clashed with bitter determination. After seven years absence, the Spook Valley country looked good to the big outlaw.

Except for one naked slash of stump-land off to the west, the Valley had changed little in appearance. But Reed Varney was grimly aware of greater changes within

himself. Changes for the worse. He was a different man now from the lean, black-haired rancher he'd been in those days. Now the thick mane was shot with streaks of silver. His formerly flat cheeks were now deeply lined. The long nose and flinty eyes made him look mean. And there were some along his meandering back-trail who argued that looks did not lie.

When his roving glance fell on a cluster of ranch buildings far below, his somber thoughts came in mutterings from thin, determined lips.

Alongside Reed Varney was a spidery, florid-faced outlaw on a dun horse. Shorty Haynes had been in the same cell with Varney in Yuma. A month ago he had answered the big man's grapevine message. Haynes was hard and dependable, which was why Varney had taken him into this deal. But the little renegade had a one-track mind that sometimes got him into trouble.

Now Haynes grumbled: "Always muterin' into your whiskers. You're stir-crazy, Varney. If you're done ganderin' at the scenery, lets get on to that timber camp we're supposed to hit before dark. I could eat skunk meat with buzzard gravy, I'm so hungry."

With slow reluctance, Varney dragged his eyes from the scene below. He giggled his horse and answered Haynes shortly.

"We'll be at French Camp in an hour," he said. "Ol' Conyak LeBree ought to be ridin' high since Dike Stolman fetched in his logger crews."

They rode across the bare slash into thick timber. Here and there the late sun cut down between the branches to splash the two men with warmth. But there were areas of deep shadows where the sun could not penetrate, and at these places Shorty peered suspiciously, his pale eyes darting about alertly.

"How about this fella Stolman?" he quizzed. "How do you know we ain't on a snipe hunt?"

"All I know about Stolman is the trail talk I've heard," Varney admitted. "That differs some, but it's all tied up with the same gut. The way it goes: Stolman is crookeder than a rattler's gullet, a dirty fighter and a damn poor loser. He pays big when there's no way out because he's got what it takes. He's either aimin' to be governor of Arizona Territory some day, or he knows the man that is. I reckon Dike Stolman has designs on Spook Valley and maybe a million acres of timber around it. Whoever stands in his way is headed for a soon grave."

"Then whoever stands with him," Shorty surmised, "holds a fist-full of aces."

Varney dropped a hand down to the butt of his gun, as if it helped him to think. "Dike Stolman sent me word he had a chore he could toss my way. He said bring along another man handy with guns. So we're here, Shorty, and we'll listen to what the big man's got to say. If it don't listen—I got a job of my own."

"Involvin' somebody named Jeremy Crane," Shorty grunted. "I've heard you mumblin' in your whiskers."

"Likely you'll hear more," Varney said. "Until either Crane or me is punchin' Gabriel's private beef herd."

Shorty Hayne's pinched face broke into a

rare grin. "First I ever heard there was an Angel Gabriel in hell!"

THEY rode down the last slope, approaching the bank of treacherous, boulder-strewn Witch Creek. For the last ten minutes they had been aware of ringing axes and the flat *twang* of working saws. Ahead, along the stream, was a tangle of newly-fallen logs, cut down without regard to young growth. From the heavy stand of fine spruce came a sudden, rolling call.

"Timber-r-r!"

The two riders sent their horses plunging back, until Varney spotted the swaying top. They were well in the clear. The big tree arced forward, picked up speed and crashed downward. Saplings were crushed and twisted under the great trunk, dust, pine needles and broken branches filled the air as the resounding impact came.

"Wasteful logging," Varney commented. Then he laughed harshly. "What the hell do I care? This is Jeremy Crane's timber."

A crew materialized out of the woods now, a half-dozen men. Axes swung in the sun as they hacked off branches from the fallen monarch. Beyond them another pair dragged their long saw to a new tree which they began notching out.

The outlaw pards were still a hundred yards from the loggers, and concealed by a screen of young stuff, when a sudden commotion broke out. With shouts and curses a dozen cowpunchers rode out of the timber, fanning out around the loggers. Their leader, a clean-cut young man gripping a rifle, sang out clearly:

"Give the timber thieves hell, boys!"

Varney's thin lips twisted in a smile as he watched riders and loggers tangle. Then his eyes narrowed as he noted one rider who hung back, along the creek bank, obedient to a commanding gesture from the yellow-haired leader. It was a girl! Brown hair tumbled around her shoulders, and a wide-brimmed hat hid her face. Varney stared for a second, then jerked his gaze back to the fight.

One logger went down under flailing hoofs. Another pitched forward as a rifle smashed against his head. A third stood his ground, swinging a double-bit axe at a horse's legs. The horse collapsed, kicking wildly and the rider was thrown against a tree trunk. Varney muttered an oath and

started forward, but Shorty Haynes grabbed his sleeve.

"It ain't our war, pardner!" He clipped. "Let 'em scrap. Who-ee! Them riders is fightin' mad. They got the axe-wranglers squallin' for mercy or headin' for timber. . . ."

The one-sided battle was quickly over. Though the loggers were a tough looking bunch, they were outnumbered, and caught off guard. Those left now flung down their weapons and ducked away through tangled underbrush, to disappear among the trees. The three men on the ground, including the one rider, looked dead.

The yellow-haired leader swung his horse around as Varney and his pard rode into sight. His rifle jerked up, and his voice came sharply.

"Are you two loggers, or punchers? If the first—git! If the second, what outfit you with?"

Varney stopped his mount and began building a smoke. "We don't own to any particular occupation," he stated easily. "Just goin' through, you might say."

"I might say, 'keep moving, then'. Fact, I do say it." The cowboy let his blue eyes flick over their clothes and horses. He was a clean-looking youngster, Varney thought, as he stood the scrutiny.

"They're a salty lookin' pair, Ed," one of the other riders opined. "Ol' Jeremy don't cotton to strange riders no more than he does to Dike Stolman's timber-thief loggers."

Varney still made no move to ride on. "You fellas ride for Crane, huh?" He jerked his head toward the girl, who still waited quietly at the creek. "Who's the girl?"

"Jeremy Crane's niece, if it's any of your business. Which it ain't. She's the girl I'm going to marry—me, Ed Fletcher. So keep your eyes where they belong. Now, you gents better drift. My boss hasn't been off this range for seven years. Nobody but his own riders allowed on it. Part of my job's keepin' drifters like you out."

He raised his rifle again, pointedly.

"C'mon," Shorty Haynes grumbled. We got no argument with these boys."

"Correct," Varney admitted. "I don't like bein' told where I can ride, and where I can't. But we got a date to keep with Dike Stolman at French Camp. You ain't herdin'

us, mister. We just ain't going your way. Adios!"

They swung down to the creek. Varney tried to get a look at the girl as they rode past, but she turned away from them incuriously. It was as if she was afraid of strangers. No wonder, if Jeremy Crane had turned hermit. He probably kept his niece close-herded. Varney had never heard of Crane having a niece, though it was likely enough.

They were well down-creek, looking for a crossing, when Ed Fletcher yelled after them. "If you're dealing with Dike Stolman, take this warnin'. Steer clear of Spook Valley!"

ACROSS Witch Creek, the two men rode on in gathering dusk. Reed Varney muttered to himself, slashing viciously through underbrush that raked their faces.

"My bet says Stolman wants us to help him buck them ranchers," Shorty guessed presently.

"Wouldn't be surprised. Suits me," Varney grunted.

"That Fletcher looks like a fairish hombre. What you so set against his boss for, Reed?"

Varney sighed. "Might do me good to get it off my chest, before the tangle comes. Crane had a different crew, back seven years. Wasn't no Ed Fletcher. Wasn't no niece, either. Crane had a few tough gunnies, and a big lout of a son named Oscar. They owned a big spread up the valley. I filed on a grazing claim over yonder. Wasn't any logging in here then. I had a wife and daughter. Jeremy's wife was dead. Os wanted my girl, Beryl, and when they was both little I figured it would be a fine thing if they got together.

"But Os Crane turned out no good. Beryl wouldn't touch him with a ten foot pole. She was a swell kid, about fifteen then, and pretty as a wild columbine." Varney's eyes grew soft for a moment. Then they hardened again.

"Jeremy kept pestering me to let 'em get hitched. It was awhile before I found out why he was so set on the marriage. Old Conyak LeBree let it out. Jeremy went on a lone drunk one night at the Frenchman's. He got running off at the chin. Blabbed that he was deep in the red on his big spread, the C-Hook, because of

Os's gambling. Wanted to get his fingers on my outfit to pull him out of the hole. Like a sucker I kept quiet, waiting."

It was a minute or so before Varney continued. When he did, his voice was thick.

"Jeremy Crane burnt me out one night, when my women was supposed to be gone. I was gone, but Beryl and her mother were sleepin' in the house when they touched it off. My wife died in that fire, Shorty, and so did Beryl. When I got home next day I found a couple little pieces of charred bone in the ashes. Nothing else left.

"I went plumb loco then, Shorty. Took after Jeremy and Os, kill crazy as any man ever was. They'd coyoted, of course. I got some likker at LeBree's and went lookin'. Must've been pretty bad off, because next thing I remember clear was on the way to Yuma, for killin' some town marshal in Tucson. You *sabe* how I served three years before somebody decided the marshal'd needed killing, and they turned me loose. I been to hell an' back since, getting up stomach to come home. Dike Stalman's grapevine call did the trick."

Shorty's twisted face showed his awe at his pard's terrible story. He asked, "What good did Crane figure it would do, burnin' you out?"

Reed Varney swore. "He thought I'd burn in that fire, instead of the women. Then he'd invite Beryl and her mother to stay at his house. With Os and Beryl thrown together like that, he'd wrangle through a wedding. Then he'd have both places in the family for bank leverage. Oh, I've had plenty of time to dope out what he figured. Only it didn't work that way."

"So now you're home," Shorty said, after a minute's silence.

Varney nodded, "And not just for the ride!"

CHAPTER TWO

Killer's Death-Pact

THE sign over Conyak LeBree's biggest log building held just two words. FRENCH CAMP. The letters were formed of small pine branches pegged onto a hewed plank with dowels. LeBree had established

a fur trading post here in the early days. Later, when white ranchers had supplanted most of the Indians hereabouts, the place became a crossroads store and Saturday night tavern. Punchers still gathered on occasion for whiskey and cards, riding in from far-flung ranches across the hills. But now the place was a lumber camp. The giant Frenchman furnished grub and sleeping quarters for Dike Stolman's loggers and mill hands, as well as continuing the tavern.

There were a dozen log shacks along the bench now. A mess hall, barns and stables for the draft stock. Across the new mill-pond was a small mill. Varney looked around with interest as he racked his mount beside Shorty's and a thin bay. LeBree's lonely forest outpost had sprouted into a thriving business, but the tough oldtimer still held forth behind his rough plank bar in the original building.

The place was crowded this night. Supper was over and the logging crews swarmed inside the huge room for nightly gambling and drinking. Reed Varney leaned against the bar and looked them over. Shorty Haynes was already in a poker game with six or eight men at one of the tables that jammed the floor. Shorty had come in first, according to their cautious plan, and he paid no attention now to his pard at the bar.

Conyak LeBree spotted Varney's lounging figure for an outsider, and tapped him on the elbow with a thick finger.

"Drink, stranger? Da first one free, one glass real French cognac, by damn! Take a long time to get dat cognac 'cross water and land, and nobody buy it from ol' Conyak LeBree. Every stranger get one—"

The thick voice stopped suddenly and the black beard dropped open. Reed Varney had turned slowly, and now his own tough face was crossed with a wide grin.

"But me, I'm no stranger, eh, Conyak? Once you busted your rule about never givin' a man more'n one drink of that imported brandy. Last time I was here. Remember?"

Strange sounds came out of the black beard of the French Camp trader. His blue eyes bulged in their sockets while the dark face paled. Reed Varney kept his grin.

"What's the matter, Conyak? Don't you remember me?"

And then the big trader found his tongue. "By damn!" he exploded. "You think LeBree ever forget what happen dat night at your ranch in Spook Valley? Sure, dat time I break my rule. And now by damn I break it again. Here, Reed, *mon ami*, you drink up this glass cognac. Sometimes I hear 'bout you, since you be away."

"Yeah?" Varney said easily. He drank the fine liquor, with a nod of thanks. "And what you hear is all bad, eh? I found out, Conyak, that the toughest men live longest."

He looked again around the crowded room. "Looks like you got a nice thing here, Conyak."

LeBree beamed. "You bet you my life!"

Varney growled. "Some of the timber up yonder would have been mine, Conyak. I had a section filed."

The Frenchman shook his head. You lose him, Varney. Long ago. Crane lets his young foreman, Ed Fletcher, file on that land. Putty soon Fletcher be working his own ranch. Den he marry dat nice gal."

"That niece of Crane's?" Varney asked idly. There was surprisingly little regret left that he had lost his claim to the old ranch. Everything had been burned out in the bitter years, save his hatred for Jeremy Crane. "Where'd she come from?"

"Don' know. Long tam ago the story go round she dere with the old man. I tink mebbe Crane go crazy after you get burn out dat time. Don' never leave the ranch no more, don' let nobody come. Dike Stolman like to buy Spook Valley timber rights, but Jeremy jus' want to fight." LeBree's burly shoulders moved in a philosophical shrug. "Mebbe putty soon Stolman haf to take dat timber. *Sacre!* Stolman gets what she wants, you bet you!"

Varney nodded, beginning to see the why of that brawl up Witch Creek this afternoon. Shorty Haynes shot him a lifted brow from his poker game, and Varney half lowered one lid. Shorty returned to his game.

"Like to meet this Dike Stolman," Reed told LeBree. "Where'll I find him tonight?"

For answer LeBree pointed to the front door. A man was just coming in.

THERE couldn't be any mistake about Dike Stolman being the big Boss of this camp. He wore work clothes—plaid wool shirt, black whipcord jeans shoved

into high-topped lace boots—the same as every other man in the room save Haynes and Varney. But the similarity ended there. All Stolman's clothes were neat and clean looking. In addition he wore a fine leather jacket, a black tie and an expensive 'ranger' style hat. A clipped gray mustache made a pattern with heavy brows on a face ruddy and smooth.

It was the eyes that drew Varney's gaze. They were cold as gray steel, with a ruthless claim to ownership of everything they touched. Those eyes roved the big room now, pausing briefly on Shorty Haynes. They slid on to Varney. The dark brows raised slightly and Dike Stolman came forward at once. He did not hold out his hand, but said crisply to LeBree.

"We'll use that back room, Conyak. I want to talk with this man."

Reed shrugged and followed, though he did not like the cold note of command. The Frenchman stared after them, his bearded jaws sagging. His muttered oath was audible.

"By damn! When two tough men put heads together, it's somebody better look out!"

Varney halted abruptly as Stolman ushered him into the back office. For there was a man seated here at the table, a hulking figure, incredibly ugly. A long scar ran from chin to temple. Black hair hung over the low forehead and the pale eyes were blinking and dull. He didn't pay any attention to them as they entered, just sat staring at the floor.

"Don't mind Slash," Dike Stolman said curtly.

"I've seen that hombre before—somewhere," Varney growled. "What's his last name?"

Stolman shrugged. "Never heard it."

"Nobody's business," the ugly man grunted suddenly. "Slash. That's me." There was a cunning gleam in the pale eyes now, as they peered at Varney. "You're gonna work with Slash, huh?"

"You'll work with him," the lumberman corrected evenly. "Sit down, Varney. Cigar?" He took two from his pocket, handed one to Varney and bit the end from the other. He ignored Slash, who had subsided into hunched indifference again.

Varney lit up. "All right, talk," he grunted.

DIKE STOLMAN'S thick fingers spread on the table-top. "I'll explain the setup, Varney. My method of logging is to clean up the best timber and move on. I've got no good stuff left around here, but Jeremy Crane's sitting on the finest stands of hardwood and spruce and red cedar in the west. He won't log it, and he won't let anybody else. When I came in here I tried to deal with him. He threw me out."

The logger's face was hard. He didn't like getting thrown out of any place, Varney saw. If there was any throwing, he wanted to do it. It would be a matter of pride with a man like Stolman.

"He holes up there in his ranch house like a little king, controlling Spook Valley with an iron hand. Never leaves the valley proper himself, and won't tolerate strangers coming in."

"Won't even let you steal his timber, eh?" Varney commented drily. "I saw one of your crews take a beating today."

Stolman swore. "Wasn't for such a fool holding Spook Valley, I could clean up big here. He's in my way, and I'll pay handsome to get rid of him, once and for all. That's your job, Varney. Get past his riders and kill Jeremy Crane on his own home grounds. You can write your own ticket for the job."

Abruptly Varney leaned back and laughed. "That's rich, Stolman! You're offering to pay me to do a job I'd do anyway."

Stolman only smiled. "I know your story, Varney. I know well enough you'd kill Crane yourself, for what he did to you. But I'll still pay. Why? Because I can't wait for you to get around to it—maybe you never would of if I hadn't sent for you. You might drift all your life, bragging what you'd do to Crane—someday. I know your stripe."

"Maybe you're right," Varney admitted. "But why not have some of your crew take care of the chore? Some of them out there look up to it. And you could wipe up Jeremy Crane's riders easy."

"I could do it that way. If I have to, I will. But there'd be investigations. The law doesn't cotton to that kind of thing."

Varney grinned crookedly. "I get it now. With my rep, my known feud with Crane, you're safe. If anybody hangs, it'll be me. . . ."

"That's about the way it's pegged," Stolman agreed blandly. "I pay you for the risk—which you're willing to take anyway. What can you lose? Here's how we'll work it. Tomorrow I send another crew in to Spook Valley. A big enough one to make a good fight when Ed Fletcher jumps them. He'll have to call on every rider he has. That leaves the ranch house unguarded, and there's your chance. You and your pard and Slash here can go in together."

Varney swung around toward the hulking man. "We don't need him," he growled.

"You're not the only man with a grudge against Jeremy Crane," Stolman said. "Slash wants to help kill Crane, but he has a special chore to do for me. Jeremy has a pretty niece. I've managed to talk to her a time or two, up along the creek when Fletcher's hawk-eye was off guard. Slash is bringing that girl to me! She's wasted in that valley."

Light again gleamed in the dull orbs of the half-crazed Slash. Cunning and diabolic, the twisted face leered at Varney in the light of the swinging lamp overhead. Varney felt a hot wave creep over him. He stared at the scarred face, and it seemed as if the years were ripped away one by one. He knew this man, all right! And with the realization came towering rage.

"Os Crane! You've changed a lot—in looks, anyway."

The big man dug at the scar on his face. He blinked back at Varney. "Yeah. You ain't the only one growed uglier than ever in prison. I killed a fool puncher here at LeBree's one night, about the time you got out down at Yuma. My old man wouldn't back me up no more. He let 'em put me away." The evil visage leered.

"But I busted out of the pen. Down there they called me Slash—after another con died tryin' to carve me to pieces. Under that name I came back, hung around here until Dike Stolman decided to give me this little chore to do. It was all right with me if he fixed it to kill my old man at the same time. But I never knowed until you walked in here that he'd picked you for the job. Well, what's the difference—we can work this together, can't we?"

Dike Stolman was wiping sweat from his forehead with a silk handkerchief. "I didn't know who he was, Varney. But like he says, we can still play the same game."

VARNEY'S hard gaze never left Os Crane's face. "I'll play the game, all right. But not with Os at my back. I don't know how much of a hand you had in burning me out that night, Os. I'll be satisfied to beat the whey out of you. Now."

He started around the table. Os went backward, babbling. "The burnin' was Dad's idea. I didn't have nothing to do with it!"

"Look here, Varney," Stolman sputtered. "I don't want any ruckus—"

Reed's tone was vicious. "The hell with what you want."

He grabbed Os suddenly by the shirt front, jerked him forward and slammed him hard on the side of the jaw. He heaved backward then and Os went spinning against the wall. Varney ripped open the door and stood there, shoulders hunched, cold eyes narrowed.

"Out here, Os. We need more room."

Os went through the doorway and Varney followed. Stolman came after them, indecisive, fingering his gun. Over at the poker table men spilled to their feet. Shorty Haynes' sharp order lashed out.

"Hold it, Stolman. Go to roost right where you are. Rest of you peavy pushers stand back. . . ."

Os went halfway down the long bar before he turned, and when he came around he was clutching a knife. Eyes gleaming, he lunged to meet Varney. The milling loggers roared encouragement, fully expecting to see the newcomers slash each other to ribbons in the next few minutes.

Reed was not caught off-guard. He had been watching carefully as he sped in pursuit. He wove sideways now, swerved again as Os tried to meet him. He ducked up under the flashing knife, driving both arms upward close together. Heaving them apart with all his strength he forced Os Crane's arms outward. Gripping the knife hand with his left, he used the right to pound the other's face and jaw.

But Os was powerful and his position now gave him a momentary advantage. He forced his knife down against Reed's bent arm, until the point ripped flesh. His scarred face was twisted in a set grin that came off a second later as Varney smashed him in the throat. Os spilled backward, choking for air. He slipped and went sprawling down, while the loggers howled loudly.

"Tromp him, mister! Put the boots to him!"

Varney paid them no heed, but kicked the knife from Os's loosened grip. It slithered across the floor. As the big man staggered to his feet Varney pummeled him hard. Os suddenly grappled him by the knees. Varney's own forward motion carried him over-balance. Grunting with triumph Os hung onto Varney's legs and stood up, starting a wicked spin.

"You got him, Slash," someone bawled. "Bat his head against the bar!"

Varney felt himself make the first revolution, head downward, skimming the splintery floor. Then his grapping fingers closed on the knife, which still lay under the rail. Twisting his body, he drove the blade into the back of Os's knee. Blood spurted as he jerked the knife forth and Os suddenly crumpled, screaming with pain. But Varney knew the wound was not serious, because he had seen the blade glance sideways. He untangled himself quickly, in time to meet Os's second upward surge.

This time it was fist against fist, both men wary. For a second Os rolled his eyes in fear of the knife, which he figured Varney still held. But seeing Reed toss the weapon over behind the bar he plunged forward once more, trying a desperate rush. Varney let him come, lowered his shoulders as if suddenly weary. He saw the leer of final triumph cross the scarred face of his adversary. And then his balled fist came up with every ounce of driving power he possessed. His knuckles met the jutting chin, and Os Crane's head snapped back. Varney drove two more blows into the bulging midriff. Os squirmed, his face going loose. Varney let him have the last one, square under the chin. Os dropped limply, his face like putty. He lay there, mumbling to himself.

While the loggers roared their throats out, Varney motioned to Shorty Haynes. "Give me a hand, Shorty."

Dike Stolman watched in stony silence as the two pardas grasped the fallen man by the arms and feet and dragged him outside. "Leave 'im here?" Shorty grunted.

"And get a bullet in the back while I'm quenching this thirst I built up? Load him on his horse!"

Together they heaved Os aboard the tired-looking bay horse. He sat there star-

ing down at them dully, clutching the horn to keep from falling. He was half conscious now. Varney looped the reins over the horn, swung the animal by the bit, then stepped back and swung his hat against the lean rump. The horse ambled off in the darkness, Os swaying drunkenly in the saddle, and mumbling to himself.

Varney swung back to the saloon, with Shorty Haynes swaggering behind. The now silent loggers parted, grinning. A dozen horny hands hammered Varney on the back then. "Set 'em up, Conyak. We're drinkin' to a fightin' man."

"Lemme fix dat shoulder," LeBree offered, digging out bandages and tape. Varney motioned him away. He strode to where Dike Stolman waited at the office door.

"I'm taking on your gun chore, mister. But stealing women is out."

For a long minute Stolman met his straight gaze. Smoke from the cigar curled up past the lumberman's cold eyes, veiling them. He showed neither interest nor emotion over the fight just over.

"All right," he shrugged. "We'll leave it like that."

And behind Varney, Shorty Haynes crowded. "C'mon, pard! 'Fore these thirsty galoots lap up all the free drinks. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

A Change of Quarry

REED VARNEY and Shorty Haynes lay on a ledge at the edge of the woods. They could look down on Jeremy Crane's ranch yard, which wasn't more than three hundred yards from the ledge. The log barns and the big log house were spread out below them, with the morning sun lighting them in strong relief and making black shadows on the ground.

Varney had got roaring drunk at LeBree's the night before. His lids were puffy and his mouth tasted like something a buzzard wouldn't eat. His shoulder hurt where Os Crane's knife had gashed it. There was a cold knot inside his belly and his temper was even edgier than usual.

The spidery little outlaw beside him looked a little green around the jowls, but outside of that looked about as much of a monkey as ever. He pointed down at two

figures that came into view on the long front gallery of the big house.

"Fletcher and the gal," he muttered. "You reckon that yaller-haired ramrod knows Stolman wants to ear-mark that little heifer?"

"Shut up," Varney growled. He gripped Shorty's arm and his breath came short with the hate that was in him as he spotted a third figure emerging from the door. A lanky old timer with a cane and a noticeable limp.

"That's him. That's the man I've waited seven years to kill!"

"Then wait till Stolman starts the ruckus over yonder someplace, and draws off Fletcher and the crew. Then we can pot Jeremy Crane from here with a rifle. And ride back to French Camp to collect our money." Shorty Haynes' wizened face was business like. He chuckled. "Easiest money I ever earned."

"Button your tongue," Varney snarled.

Down in the yard there was a flurry of motion. Ed Fletcher ran out to meet a rider who came pounding across the fields. They talked for a minute, and the rider pointed to the forest beyond the far meadow. And now to their ears came the faintly audible crash of a falling tree. Dike Stolman and his crew were on the job!

Jeremy Crane danced around on the porch, waving his cane and shouting in rage. Ed Fletcher sprinted for the bunkhouse while the girl tried to calm the old man down. Presently Fletcher had his riders saddling in the corral, and a few minutes later they rode off across the meadows at a fast clip.

Varney started hitching himself backward from the edges. "All right," he grunted. "I'm going down. You stay here."

"Not me," Shorty argued. "Doggone you, s'pose some of them come back while you're foolin' around. Long's you're loco enough to go tell the old man off before you shoot 'im, I'm coverin' your tracks."

Varney shrugged and started worming his way down through the underbrush. For a while he was out of sight of the yard, and when he came down to level with the house and barns he stopped for a gander. Jeremy Crane was still out on the gallery, gripping the rail and peering across the flats where his men had disappeared. He was mumbling to himself. The girl had gone inside, and

Varney could hear her bustling around in the kitchen. She began to sing, nervously, and for a second or two Varney froze there, listening. The sweet tones stirred memories inside him that whipped up his cold hate of Jeremy Crane.

His face was a wooden mask when he finally came up alongside the house, after ducking along behind various outbuildings and wagons. He took off his hat and laid it carefully on the ground, leaning the rifle against the wall beside it. Then he hitched his belt gun a little more forward and walked out around the end of the gallery, in plain view of the man on it.

JEREMY CRANE clutched the porch rail and stared at the man coming up the steps. The sun slanted strongly across Varney's hard features, making his identity instantly certain. Varney stopped on the top step, raising his head to meet Crane's startled eyes. For a long moment neither man spoke. Then Jeremy Crane spoke testily.

"You've been a long time coming back, Varney."

"A damn long time, Jeremy. Too long," Varney agreed. He studied the old man coldly.

Years that had carved toughness into Varney, had also wrought changes in this white-haired rancher. The gaunt, hard-driving cattleman Reed recalled had gone. In his place was a stooped, limping husk of a man, with gnarled hands that gripped the cane like the talons of a hawk. The lined face was strong still, but the blue eyes were incredibly deep-set, under brows that curled and twisted. Haunting pain was in those eyes.

"I've been waiting for this day too," Crane said next, without taking his gaze from Varney's face. "I swore never to set foot outside the ranch yard, for fear you might return, and I not be here to meet you."

"You're meeting me now," Varney answered. He flicked his eyes from Crane's hips to his armpits. "You better go in and get a gun. I'll give you a chance to plug me while I pick your eyeballs out, one at a time. The first one for my wife, the second for Beryl! You murdered them both!"

Crane's stick made tapping sounds on the plank floor as he limped to a rocker.

He lowered himself into it. Varney jerked an impatient thumb toward the door.

"I said get your irons! I'll shoot you any way, make no mistake about that."

"You'll get your chance—if you still want it. But first you've got to know what you're shooting about. I'll start off with my—niece. . . . Here, stand back a bit, Varney. I want to see just how she acts when she sights you."

Varney frowned. It looked as if the rancher had gone loco. He was starting a blistering curse, when Crane raised his voice.

"Honey! Come out here a minute. That's right, the front door."

Light steps came from the kitchen, and then the door opened. The girl stepped into view, then stopped. The breeze that came across the yard stirred her gingham dress, plucked at the dark hair around her shoulders. And Varney was staring, reeling, clutching spasmodically at a porch column. His voice came from his lips in hoarse disbelief.

"Beryl!"

He knew it wasn't possible, yet it was his own daughter who came from Jeremy Crane's house, a puzzled frown on her clear brow. She sided the old man, without taking her eyes from Varney.

"Who—is he, Uncle Jem? Why did he call me Beryl?"

She didn't know him. There wasn't the faintest trace of recognition in the gray eyes. Varney swallowed and held his place rigidly, trying to get hold of himself. Beryl was prettier than ever, straight and slim, yet girlishly rounded. She looked like her mother.

Varney found his voice now and it still sounded harsh. "How about—my wife?" he demanded.

Jeremy spoke to the girl first. His seamy face was gentle. Gentle and kindly and full of love for this girl who called him 'Uncle Jem'. "He's your father, honey. Your name is Beryl. I was hoping seeing him would make you remember."

"My—father?" Her face was pale now, as she searched Varney's face. She did not come to him, but stood there, her small hands pressed tight against her bodice. And suddenly she turned down the steps, almost stumbling.

"I—I've got to think. To ride and think.

Maybe—it—will come to me now!" She went swiftly around the house and Varney could hear her light steps fading toward the barn. He looked down at his knuckles, white against the porch rail. Slowly then he raised questioning eyes to Jeremy Crane. Not until then did the old man answer his question.

"Your wife died in that fire, Varney," Crane said slowly. "The fire that my son, Oscar, set. I was everything you thought I was: hungry for power, greedy for land. And I wanted that marriage to go through, because I was blind to the viciousness that had been born in Os. It nearly killed me when I learned what he had done that night. When he came home and *bragged* about it."

"And Beryl?" Varney questioned, his mind still dulled by the shock of these minutes. "How could I have missed her? Even if she did wander away from the fire."

Jeremy Crane shrugged. "I'm not sure what did happen. But I've had time to piece some of it together by guess. The fire—what happened that night to her mother—it did something to her, Varney. I went after Os that night, just as I learned later you went after us both. I found him—but he was still my son, Varney. We had a row, but in the end I promised him I wouldn't turn him over to the law. We came home, and Beryl was here. She was sick, delirious. And when that passed she had forgotten who she was.

"You don't know what I went through those next couple of years, Varney. I took her to every doctor in the west. They all said the same. A case of amnesia, of lost identity due to shock and terror. She might get over it, or might not. She's lived with me here since, and I've not set foot off the ranch, like I said. When Os got in another scrape, killing a cowpuncher at Le-Bree's, I let the law have him. I guess he's still at Reno."

Jeremy stood up then, and his eyes met Varney's squarely. There was dignity in his expression and in his next words.

"Now if you want to shoot me, I'll get my gun. So it can't be called murder."

A MAN couldn't pack a hate like Varney's in his heart for seven years and get over it in a minute. Reed felt bewildered,

dazed, but honest anger surged in him now.

"You're almighty pious about what you've done for Beryl. But I'm not forgetting it's you that wrecked my life. No matter how you paint it, it's still the same picture." He laughed roughly, feeling the jar of it go through him. "Dike Stolman offered to pay me for killing you. That's why he drew your crew and fighting foreman off into the woods. To give me this chance."

He shook his head heavily. "Now . . . I don't know. Maybe I should have let your precious son do the job of killing you—though I'd shoot him like a dog for the other part of the job Stolman wanted him for."

It was Jeremy's turn for shock. His head dropped forward a little, and cocked to one side. "You mean Os is out of prison?"

Varney nodded. "Yeah. You wouldn't know your pretty boy. He—"

It was a muffled yell, from out back someplace, that cut Varney's words off, brought him pivoting around. He knew the voice belonged to Shorty Haynes. In the tense moments just past he had forgotten his little partner. Vaulting the gallery rail, he hit the ground running.

Jeremy Crane's stick rapped the steps as he followed. Varney was hesitating at the back of the house, uncertain. "The biggest barn," Jeremy panted. "Came from there."

Almost side by side they plunged through the wide doorway into a dusty interior. Varney stumbled over a sprawled figure. Shorty Haynes lay face down in the litter. Blood oozed from a wound on the little outlaw's head. Varney swung on Crane savagely.

"Your stablebuck—or a cook, maybe?"

Jeremy shook his head. The old man's face was pale. "Everybody went with Ed. Your daughter's the cook. *Listen!*"

Hoofs drummed the ground back of the barn. Crane limping after him, making straw fly with his stick, Varney went out the rear door, alongside a pole corral. A pinto horse, riderless, stirrups flopping, skidded on turf and stopped, heaving.

Crane's gasp was weak with fear. "Honey's horse—Beryl's. . . ."

"There!" Varney swore thickly, point-

(Continued on col. 90)

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(Continued from page 88)

ing. Far along the edge of the woods skirting the meadow on this side, two figures struggled atop a speeding horse. One hulking, grizzly-like, the other skirted and slim. Even as Jeremy followed Varney's pointing finger they disappeared in an opening of the trees, a good half mile off.

"All your mounts gone but a few sorry nags!" Varney was raking a hackamore from a peg near the door.

Jeremy Crane flung open the gate. Another hackamore in hand he made for a second horse in the tame bunch. Awkward he was, with his game foot, and no saddle, yet he was no more than a second or two behind Varney as the latter pounded through the open gateway. Varney's grim face was mask-like as he shot a glance sideways at his companion.

"I should have broke his loco neck last night. Stolman's, too!" Varney's yelled words were cryptic, but Crane nodded and hollered back.

"I know . . . It's Os. We've got to—stop him."

THEY followed Os Crane's tracks five miles into tangled, forested ridges. Jeremy had shouted that the dim trail led into a maze of ledges and caves. Where the curve of the valley's far side pinched in Varney abruptly halted and stared down.

"Another horse came in here," he grunted. "Probably Stolman. Letting his men scrap while he tends to other knitting."

He whirled in the saddle, gun drawn as hoofs broke into sound to the right. Ed Fletcher, hat gone and one eye blacked, came into sight. He also had a drawn gun, which he centered on Varney. The two sat there an instant, deadlocked. Jeremy Crane gave a mirthless chuckle.

"He ain't kidnapping me, Ed." He shot a look at Varney. "At least I guess not. Though maybe—"

"Forget it," Varney growled. And to Fletcher he snarled a question. "You following Dike Stolman?"

Ed nodded stiffly, still wary. "The big fella sneaked off from the scrap—which is some brawl, take it from me. My boys are showin' loggers what it means to fight. But how come you two—"

Jeremy explained all that was necessary.

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and the youngster's face went gray. "Honey! And you fools stand here talkin'—"

He jerked his mount around and plunged it into the narrowing trail. The boy, Varney conceded, would do. He followed, Crane bringing up the rear and groaning at every jarring step of his horse. Seven years afoot was a long time.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fight in the Forest

IT WAS the sharp crack of a rifle that caused Ed Fletcher to yank his horse to a sliding halt. A white slash appeared like magic on a trunk beside the young foreman's head. The shot sent echoes pounding against rocky ledges.

Reed Varney pulled up behind Fletcher and peered across a steep talus slope, bare of timber or brush. A jutting cliff edged the talus above and from the top of this rampart a round ball of smoke rose and faded. Os Crane's bellowing voice rang out.

"End of the road for you three! I can cover that slope for a week."

Jeremy pushed his mount past Varney, standing revealed in the thick fringe of brush that hid the others. "Os, you damn fool! If you've hurt the girl . . . I'm coming up there. You wouldn't shoot your own father—"

The crazed son's answer was another shot from the rifle. Reed Varney heard the bullet strike flesh, saw Jeremy lurch sideways. A second later the old man slid from the horse's bare back, sprawling in the brush. He twisted on the ground.

Os's jarring laugh sounded. "There you are, Pop! That's for lettin' me rot in the pen."

Fletcher and Varney were off their mounts now. Reed jerked up his sixgun and fired at the spot in a rocky nest where Crane's shot had come from. He couldn't see any movement up there. Then he was helping Fletcher drag the groaning Jeremy back to safety. Two more shots pegged down at them, clipping twigs from the brush.

"The snake!" Fletcher swore. His face was tight as a drum head, his clear eyes bunched with worry and rage. He stared

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at Varney for a moment. "What's she to you, fella?" he jerked out. "The girl I was going to marry!"

Reed shrugged. His own gaze was sweeping the ledge, while he held his gun ready. "My daughter," he grunted. And added grimly. "The girl you're still going to marry—if she wants you. We'll get her. I'm wondering where Stolman disappeared to."

He was raising his gun for a blind shot when a call sounded from above, a voice from back on the hidden terrace. "Slash! Os Crane! You got the girl?"

And Os's thick tones answered baldly. "Yeah. She's in one of them caves. You got to fight for her now, Dike. Crawl up here and we'll draw straws for the two that's left: Varney and Fletcher."

Fletcher had been on his knees beside Jeremy, pressing a balled up shirt tail against a ragged chest wound. He came up now, breathing hard with emotion. "I'm goin' up there, mister. Right now. Cover me!"

Before Varney could grab at him, the foreman was gone through the fringe of brush. He headed up across the slope where the trail led to the far end of the ledge. Varney forced his eyes from the plunging figure to the rim in time to spot two figures springing into view with raised rifles. Stolman and Os Crane both fired at once.

Ed Fletcher went down hard on the rocks, twisting and rolling down the slope. He tried to sit up, then slumped against a boulder in plain view of those above. Varney swore as he drove a shot at the best target up there—Dike Stolman. The lumberman staggered, swung around and went down on his knees.

Os Crane's crazy laughter rang against the cliffs. Like a mad silvertip he lunged across a small space, rifle raised club fashion. He brought the butt down on Stolman's head, roaring wildly as bones crunched. Even as Reed grimly poured lead at him, the crazed one raked a roll of bills from Stolman's pocket, then callously rolled him off the cliff with his boot.

Os Crane stood with wide-spread legs, waving his gun in derision at Varney. "Three down—an' one to go. How'll you have it. Head or brisket?"

Two of Reed's bullets hit him, but Os brushed at the places as though they were

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horns stinging. He laughed again and dropped into the shelter of his rock nest. Varney reloaded, cursing savagely at his helplessness.

HE WAS searching frantically for some other way up the ledge when Ed Fletcher lurched up to one elbow, head swaying. Varney changed his plan. "I'm coming after you," he called guardedly.

"Don't," Ed grunted, through set teeth. He was fumbling around for his gun, but it was up the slope, beyond reach.

Reed began a hunched run across the rocks. He heard Os Crane's grunt of triumph, then a dull click followed by hoarse cursing. Reed grinned crookedly, knowing he had seconds of grace while Os reloaded an empty weapon. He swung Fletcher up into strong arms, sweating with the effort.

They were nearly to shelter when the bushwhack rifle cracked again. Varney felt the impact of that bullet, like a hammer blow against his skull. He made the two last steps into the brush fringe before he crumpled, and the world slid away.

He came to with Fletcher crouched over him, muttering wretchedly. "Damn—damn—damn. Os off guard and none of us able—By God, I'm trying it!"

Varney's fingers closed on his ankle, pulling him back. "Hold it," he got out weakly. "I'm comin' around—I hope. Now what—"

Fletcher looked all of ten years older. "Os thinks we're all dead, I reckon. I'm pretty sure he's gone back where he's got Honey."

Varney spilled him gently, pushed his shoulders down. He threw one look above and started out across the rocks again.

IT WASN'T so hard to find a way up the crumbled end of the ledge, once he rounded the shielding bluff. Os Crane's thin bay and Stolman's fine sorrel were tied to yielding spruce branches.

Even so it took him ten minutes, nearly, to make the stiff climb to the rim. He edged over the top, spotted the black mouth of a cave fifty feet back, where a second cliff rose. And Os Crane sat there like a hulking animal, shaggy hair drooping over the scarred face. He was swaying back and forth, moaning, plucking with stubby

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fingers at a blood soaked shirt. His rifle lay across his lap and beyond him, in the cave's gloom, was a splotch of color. Beryl was there!

It was like a flame in Varney's head, pulling him up the last step. When he came erect he spoke easily.

"Sit tight, Os, and maybe you'll get a chance at life."

The shaggy head jerked up. Os did not hesitate and Varney hadn't really expected him to. The rifle swung and ejected flame with incredible speed. Reed felt the slug bite a chunk from his left arm, high up. Then his own weapon bucked in his hand as he squeezed the trigger.

Os fell forward loosely, hunched over the rifle on his knees.

Reed walked over, gave the dead man a curious glance. Packing the wounds he had carried back from the rim, only a miracle had kept Os alive so long. Varney knew his bullet had only hastened things by minutes. He felt no elation, only a great weariness, and a strange reluctance to go into the cave to his daughter.

And then she was calling out, while he hesitated to wonder if after all he hadn't better fade into the owlhoot trails now, while he had the chance, leaving the men below this last chore. But it was the word the girl used that decided him.

"Dad! Aren't you going to untie me?"

He went in then, grinning like a fool.

JEREMY CRANE'S big log ranch house was decked out for a wedding. The preacher from over west of the mountains waited in the front room.

"The name'll soon be Beryl Fletcher, ma'am," young Ed taunted her, laughing at the high color on her cheeks.

She put her arms around him and said, "You almost got a nameless bride. Uncle Jem'd never have told me, even if he was giving us as a wedding gift the old place Dad filed on. Isn't it lucky Dad came home in time?"

"Lucky! Downright providence. Look at 'em out there—tryin' to get acquainted again—stiff as two game cocks even after five weeks under the same roof."

Reed Varney sat in the sun with Jeremy, on a half-log bench outside the bunkhouse. Reed's eyes were somber as he gazed out

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on the meadow beyond the corrals, where they had buried Shorty Haynes.

"He was a good pard, for an outlaw. He finished as I'd have finished if I'd rode the dark trails much longer." He looked up at Jeremy, almost shyly. "I came mighty close to killing you, Jeremy."

Old Jeremy Crane squirmed under the bandage that was still wound about his chest. "Look!" he said abruptly, glad of the diversion. "Here comes Conyak LeBree, duded up for the wedding."

The Frenchman rode up to the front gallery and got down. He untied a bulging towsack from behind his saddle and went into the house with it. The sack clinked when he walked. Pretty soon he came back out to chin with the men on the bench.

"By gar, dat's gonna be one fine wedding feast."

"Yeah," Varney grunted. "How's things down at the camp, Conyak? Guess you're pretty lonely, since all those loggers pulled out. They couldn't stand to be whipped to size by common cowpokes."

"I got me another crew, by damn!" the Frenchman said. "Dike Stolman leave all dat fine equipment, I figure why not use him? Now by damn, Conyak LeBree get rich!" His bearded face grew long. "T'ing is, Stolman log out last good trees in dere already."

"Tell you what, Conyak," Jeremy Crane said. "You log Spook Valley the right way, and we'll split three ways. You and me and Varney."

"Huh?" Reed swung around. "Where do I come in?"

Jeremy laid a hand on his arm. "I'm twenty years older'n you, Reed. With Ed married, runnin' his own place, I need help. Fact is, I've kind of counted on you taking over half interest in the Valley—leaving out Ed's and Beryl's portion. Those kids won't want us older men bothering them. How about it?"

Even then Reed had to keep up the pretense of being tough. He ignored Jeremy's question and asked one of LeBree.

"What'd you have in that sack, Conyak?"

"Cognac, by damn!" A grin widened in the black beard. "Nobody buy dat fine brandy from LeBree. Dat's for special occasion. Like mebbe one big wedding!"

THE END



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(Continued from page 55)

SLOWLY, he turned his back on the wagons, raised his hands high and backed, step by step, toward the train. He did not realize how much like a Kiowa he looked, with his light hair blackened with smoke and grease and floating on his shoulders. His sun-darkened face was gleaming in the dusky light. He looked wild and dangerous and his high-pitched cry of greeting sounded like a war whoop. He was lucky indeed that he did not get a bullet in his back as he edged up to the circle of wagons. But they held their fire, and soon his white teeth were flashing a warm smile of confidence. The men lowered their guns.

Sol extended his palm in greeting. The wagon master thrust out his hand to give an Indian salute and to his surprise the boy grabbed his fingers and gave him a hearty, if bone-crushing, Yankee handshake. This much he remembered.

"Kiowa?" queried the wagonmaster. "White man," Sol said firmly.

Only a few words of English remained in Sol's vocabulary, not enough to tell his story. Desperately, he looked around for some way to establish his origin. He saw a fragrant, steaming pan on a wagon tongue. He sniffed the old, familiar odor and licked his lips. "Corn pone," he grinned, pointing to the dish. A roar of laughter told him he had returned to his own people.

The mules were hitched up, the wagon-train hitched forward once more to make a few more miles before sunset.

At that moment Solomon was determined to stay with the wagon train for the rest of his life, but he changed his mind when they came upon a war party of Osages the next day.

Smoking in a friendly manner with the whites, the Osage leader said haltingly, "Kill Kiowas."

Sol felt the back of his neck stiffen and his blue eyes darkened and narrowed to savage slits with grim approval. When the Osages moved on, Sol watched them filing over a rise of ground. Then a shrill cry came out of his throat. He leaped from the wagon seat and chased after them through the tall grass. He had to get himself some Kiowas.

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UNDER Sol's knowing leadership, the Osages surrounded the Kiowas and were still invisible. The Osages carried guns and were well armed. They waited until the Kiowa tribe of A'date had carelessly camped against a rocky defile from which there was no retreat. Gleeefully, Sol lay flat on his bare belly and singled out the lodge of Old Lamey, his former master. Then, in the gray dawn, the Osages struck.

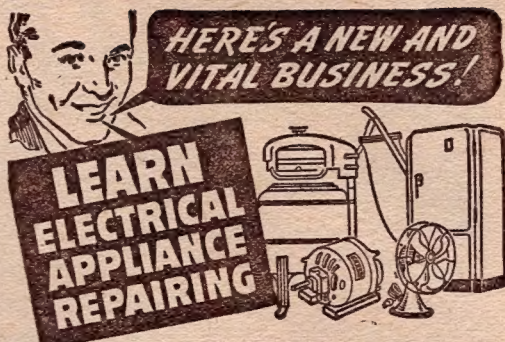
There was savage battle for a few brief minutes. The Kiowas, completely surprised, tumbled from their couches and raced for safety. The Osages, their shaved heads bent low over their shining guns, exterminated the tribe. Sol caught Old Lamey running wildly toward the hill's crest; he felled him with an arrow through the back of his neck.

The Osage braves were impressed by the daring of the youthful white and indicated to him several victims whose scalps belonged to him. But Sol shook his head. "White men do not take scalps," he explained to the Osages, and they nodded.

Sol gazed longingly at the long black hair floating over Old Lamey's dead back and asked, "If white men don't take scalps, what battle trophies have they?"

The Osage chieftain looked wisely at him and answered cynically, "Silver." Sol looked around for some silver. He found no coin, but he was joyful when he sighted two silver disks thrust through Old Lamey's ears.

Raising his knife, Sol cut off the Kiowa's ears and turned them so that the silver glinted in the rising sun. "White man no savage," he explained to the Osages. "He does not take scalps, only silver." After that he was known as Solomon Silver.



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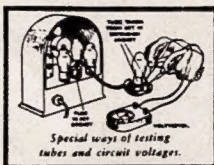
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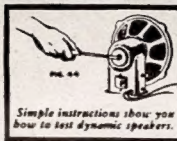
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